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Cuttura M. Richardson

With love from his godmother

March 17th, 8.

Given to me F. E. Blake

by Mrs Ralph

my dear Friend.

THE MASTER-KNOT

THE MASTER-KNOT

By

ALICE BIRKHEAD

"You may safely go to school with hope; but ere you marry, should have learned the mingled lesson of the world: that dolls are stuffed with sawdust and yet are excellent playthings; that love and hope address themselves to a perfection never yet realised, and yet, firmly held, become the salt and staff of life; that you yourself are compacted of infirmities, perfect, you might say, in imperfection, and yet you have a something in you lovable and worth preserving."—R. L. S.

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TO

PROFESSOR WALTER RALEIGH

THE MASTER-KNOT

CHAPTER I

THE train passed, with Hibernian slothfulness, through the sodden fields of Co. Antrim, bearing a compartment filled with passengers from the English packet-boat. Most of them were drowsy, ill-tempered, and restless after the stormy crossing, which had meant the loss of a night's rest. One only seemed cheerfully indifferent to fatigue and discomfort—a florid, broad-shouldered man in a curly-brimmed hat and light fawn ulster. As the train slowed down for the first time since leaving Dublin, he opened the door and jumped out, eager for an opportunity to stretch his legs and taste the whisky of his native land.

After an apparently welcome visit to the squalid buffet, he hurried back to the train, with the buoyant good-humour in his smile that had already caused several fellow-passengers to relax into geniality. He brought with him a thick cup of tea and passed it to a girl lying back in the furthest corner, a mere bundle of wraps and furs.

"Tea? No, thank you. I really couldn't." The voice was cold and a shade contemptuous. The face, which was half concealed by a thick veil, hardly turned

in the direction of the good-natured giant, who stood awkwardly balancing the cup in the doorway.

"Perhaps one of you ladies might like?" He glanced round the company, appeal in his honest blue eyes. An elderly woman accepted his offer with a gracious courtesy, which was meant to convey a rebuke to the girl, who refused an attention, well-meant if obtrusive.

He was comely enough, this gallant traveller, though there was exaggeration in his whole aspect. His teeth, white, even, of perfect condition, seemed to advertise their beauty as the full lips parted; his straight back and muscular limbs vaunted their proportions with each movement of the body. His clothes were well-cut but showy; the hand with which he twisted a heavy auburn moustache asserted its claim to admiration by the rosy polish of each finger-tip, the carefully trimmed nails, the handsome rings. The whole air of the man breathed vanity of the less subtle kind, and a childlike demand for the notice of his fellows. George Graham did not withhold appreciation from others if they pleased him; he demanded it in return with a simplicity that transformed the fault into a less despicable shape. He performed several kindly offices before he entered the train once more. He lifted a child from the high step and helped an overladen market-woman to dispose of her baskets; he bought a sheaf of magazines and distributed them; he called for a fresh relay of foot-warmers and saw to their disposal. All this was done amidst bustle and loud colloquy: there was none of the quiet ease of the courtier born about him. He wanted to

win a pleasant standing among the companions of a few hours—their thanks were welcome to him and their late-won affability. One of them was a very great lady, as he had seen from her labelled trunks; and when the Hon. Annabel O'Rourke addressed a few nonchalant remarks to him about the wretchedness of the weather, and the shocking discomfort of the train, his cup of happiness was full. The smile broadened into a nervous grin, his legs stretched further out across the seat, the loose coins in his pockets jangled as he thrust his hands up and down in jerky, boyish movements.

Silence fell at last on every passenger. The rain pattering on the glass soothed many into fitful naps. Dr Graham took up his newspaper and began to read, with a rustling of leaves and string of smothered comments, that irritated the girl beside him into speech. She had been trying to forget his red-and-white complacent features, and had succeeded for some odd minutes. With a sigh she threw off a rug and sat up, pushing aside her splendid sables.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked languidly, trying to distinguish the landmarks of the unfamiliar country, through which they were passing.

"Very nearly. Let me rub that window for you. Half an hour will see us in Ballymore station, and in less than an hour we shall be sitting down to supper in our own house." The triumph of the husband's tone was manifest, despite an attempt to suppress his voice into confidential note. A shock of attention pervaded the atmosphere. Nobody had hitherto divined that

the pair were even fellow-voyagers. The man's persistent civilities had been offered indiscriminately—they had been rebuffed by the only one who might have claimed them.

The bride sat haughtily erect and took a brief survey of the stretch of pastoral bog, which looked flat and prosaic enough in its shroud of autumn mist. Her inattentive ears had heard it described wth enthusiastic patriotism and deep-rooted insular yearning. The land had possessed something of enchantment for her once, as the cradle of heroes and bards. To-day its praises obsessed her. She saw in them that touch of grotesque lavishness, which she shrank from in her husband. She had given up the attempt to simulate the interest of a bride since the violent tossing in the Channel had prostrated her. She longed to come to the end of the journey, yet she dreaded its conclusion. She was hungry, yet the sight of food provoked intolerable nausea. She was cold, while she impatiently cast off the costly wraps that threatened suffocation. The rain, the steaming atmosphere, the sound of harsh voices in an adjoining carriage, the glimpse of unlovely market-towns—how distasteful was the background of a new phase of life from which she shrank struggling but impotent! Her position had become intolerably cramped by her husband's side—she would willingly have leapt to certain death to escape the horror of his continued scrutiny.

"Half an hour!" She shut her eyes again and sank back. She realised, against her will, that just thirty minutes of oblivion were possible, while before her

stretched, perhaps, thirty years, during which she might never once forget that George Graham was her husband.

Even when the magnificent dark eyes were closed, Lota Graham's face was one of remarkable charm—the indefinable charm that leads too powerful an allurement after it to be a gift to the possessor. A natural pallor of complexion was deadened by fatigue, but Lota's beauty depended little on fading tints of complexion. It lay rather in a statuesque perfection of line and curve, a subtle combination of grace and strength, a suggestion of spiritual depths, a hint of all-human mockery. A wealth of glossy hair, of the same shade as the eyes, was plaited into a coronet above the fine brow, in a fashion only becoming to a classical mould of features. The thick masses, half-loosened, seemed to make the head droop on the round, firmly poised neck. Courage looked out of the handsome eyes till they closed, and then pride locked the lips into a defiant calm.

Half an hour! She was letting her mind stray back into well-loved haunts of memory. She was very far from the ken of her neighbour, undisturbed now by his restlessness. George Graham was looking through a bundle of letters and making memoranda with a gold pencil attached to his watch-chain. Now and then, he became absorbed in his occupation, and his pencil moved with heavy emphasis as he consulted the sporting columns of a newspaper, but he always emerged again, ready for conversation with anyone who would listen to him. The subject was generally trivial—the unpunctuality of the local train service, the unseasonable cold, the differ-

ence between London and Dublin accommodation. He was unsparing in condemnation, prodigal in approbation. His temper was roused by a chance jest to fever heat, and cooled with amazing rapidity by a clumsy retraction.

Half an hour! Lota was roused from her hardly-snatched respite, long before the time seemed to have expired. She rose with grudging acquiescence as the train stopped at Ballymore. Her husband threw portmanteaux and handbags on the platform, and dashed down the station in search of heavier luggage in the van, betraying all the disconcerting frenzy of an inexperienced traveller.

Lota was left standing amidst a throng of country folk, who jostled and elbowed her with a freedom she resented. They were surly and ill-favoured; the composite odour of whisky, rank tobacco, and Antrim soil made the air heavily oppressive; the rough dialect caused a sense of antagonism to quicken. She was an alien; she understood neither the speech nor customs of the people, among whom she had been dropped. She was usually quick to observe and enjoy new impressions, but there would be so long now. It was not a brief, vivid glimpse into an unknown environment; it was the beginning of a never-ending, dreadful monotony.

The well-to-do strangers on the platform surveyed her with undisguised curiosity after the train had passed out of sight. She was become a mark of attention to a knot of men, who had come out of the refreshment bar. Lota moved to the covered entrance to the station, where she could stand unnoticed.

George joined her at last, heated and indignant with the result of a search for missing property. A dog-cart was waiting, drawn by a spirited black horse, which pawed the ground impatiently.

"You've had the mare waiting an hour? Why the devil didn't you keep her out on the road at a rattling pace?" George's wrath burst forth in a torrent of vituperation at the groom.

A man turned at the noisy abuse and came forward under the hanging lamp.

"Why, docthor! back at last. Leave the traps to Denis and join me at a glass."

George spoke a few words of explanation aside, then turned to Lota to perform the ceremony of introduction.

Lota bowed, vaguely conscious that the man before her was one of those who had driven her into retreat. A hearty laugh, a clasp of the hand, a hackneyed jest bade her welcome to Ballymore. Mr Alan Crawford was an unfamiliar type to her, but not entirely displeasing at the first glance. He was short, sandy, immaculately dressed, and of a sporting class. Ready commonplaces flowed from him easily. He would have chatted for half an hour in the rain, if George had not dismissed him abruptly.

"Ta-ta. See you again soon, I hope, Mrs Graham. What a dog you were, docthor! Sly, 'pon my word."

They drove off and left him chuckling, with his hat upraised in flattering courtesy.

A badly-paved road rendered anything more than

jerky comment impossible till bride and bridegroom drew up at a house in the main street.

"It *is* hard luck for you to see the place first on a wet night," George said, helping his wife to alight. "Ah! here are the girls! Well, Jeanie, I've brought you back '*un cadeau de Paris.*'"

A meek little woman of forty fluttered up to her sister-in-law timidly.

"You'll be tired out. We expected you at three o'clock. Come in to supper. I'm sure we're very glad to see you at last."

"I must see that Diana is properly looked after," George called apologetically. "Run in, Jeanie, and take Lota to a warm room. Where's Kate?"

A taller woman came forward and shook hands stiffly. Hard scrutiny was in her restless steel-blue eyes, antagonism in her greeting.

"You'll sit down now without laying by your things," she suggested, leading the way into a large, bare room where a plentiful meal, combining the requisites of both tea and dinner, was set forth.

George came in as the three women stood together by the fire, making conversation indifferently. Ceremonious in details, he led his wife to the head of the table and installed her behind the massive silver tea-pot, which had been stored up in anticipation of his marriage.

"Your nose is out of joint," he remarked to Kate, who smiled rather sourly at the jest. She had been accustomed to do the honours of her brother's household

for some eight years. Jean bore the brunt of the work, and was satisfied to take a second place.

The meal dragged in spite of desperate efforts on Lota's part to assume the position just attained. Her husband was busily engaged in satisfying his appetite, Jean was too shy to respond to first overtures, and Kate maintained a grim taciturnity.

A rush of loneliness came over Lota, hostess in a house where she alone was strange; opposite to her the unknown personality linked irrevocably to hers; on each side, a woman, who felt keenly that she had been wronged. At the end of the meal, she asked leave to retire on the plea of a violent headache, and, touched by the shadow in the deep eyes, Jean escorted her to her room with all despatch.

"Shall I help you to unpack?" Kate asked in a more friendly tone. She hoped to gain some knowledge of the bride's state and circumstances by a glimpse into the great, battered trunks, with their multitudinous labels.

"I will leave it to-night, thank you," Lota said wearily. "I should only arrange them, perhaps, in all the wrong places. There will be to-morrow."

"To-morrow will be Sunday," Kate said brusquely. "Well, never mind. You know best."

She hurried off to catch George before he went to the stables. She had determined to hear the story of his unexpected marriage from his own lips. Jean might be satisfied with a curt letter announcing his intention of bringing home a bride, but she was not the sort of woman to suffer social eclipse without being convinced of the inevitability.

CHAPTER II

SLEEP did not come quickly to Lota in her new home. The physical stupor induced by fatigue was accompanied by an activity of the brain that kept her feverishly tossing, while scene after scene passed before her mental vision with all the incoherence of a certain phase of sleeplessness. She saw herself, as if in a mirror, standing hand-in-hand with the Irish surgeon as they both repeated the formula of the ceremony, that bound them as man and wife. She recalled with a pang of odd regret that her dress had been a shabby one, worn many times before in the Champs Elysées. The conventional trappings of a bride could never now be hers. She had planned them often with merry girl-friends in days that seemed far off.

She began to realise with agonised perspicuity the nature of the change that had come into her life. It meant a complete, violent severance from the past, the destruction of many cherished hopes, the loss of all that renders girlhood a time of happy expectation. Her story was one for which she dared not claim sympathy. Life must henceforward be a hypocritical masking of her real feelings. She must give up friends, who might penetrate to the truth, for the sake of pride, her only stay.

Lota Wynne had been companion-governess in a French professor's household when she met Dr Graham three months before. She was an orphan of gentle

birth, who had been thrown on her own resources at the age of twenty, with a tiny income that only sufficed for pin-money. Of her father she had only a blurred recollection; he had died of a malignant fever that devastated the Indian province, where his regiment was stationed. She had been educated in a Swiss pensionnat, and was making her mark as a coming musician in the town of Leipzig, when Mrs Wynne was killed in a street accident, and the pleasant Bohemian home was broken up. An elder sister, who had been considered still more promising at the conservatoire, abandoned her career to share the fortunes of a clever, elderly scientist, who had won her rather fatuous devotion by means of careless superiority to a woman's love. Frances was strong and self-reliant in the days of her soaring ambitions; she had overshadowed the fragile, helpless mother, and possessed considerable ascendancy over her young sister, but the day came when she was a mere echo of masculine opinion and the epitome of wifely self-sacrifice. She had allowed Lota to go her own independent gait, conscious that the bond between them was snapped asunder. Morpeth Vane would have welcomed his wife's sister, but he would have expected the deference and homage she was not prepared to pay. So Lota went forth into the world and fared but ill in the battle of lonely maidenhood.

Her first post as *dame de compagnie* to a Russian baroness introduced her to a world of adventurous frivolity, where her beauty was not permitted to pass unnoticed. She was on the footing of a daughter of

the house, for the baroness had been one of Mrs Wynne's earliest friends; but difficulties pressed round her during the two years' sojourn at Riga, where life was a constant interchange of splendid hospitality. She was compelled by the pressing attentions of a dissolute noble to beg for release from her engagement, and a recommendation to a less exalted household. The baroness admired her modesty, though she had seldom encouraged it, and found her an establishment in the family of a learned Frenchman.

"You will find it dull and bourgeois, but you will be safe, oh! quite safe. I should have liked you to remain with me always. It is a thousand pities that the Count declared himself so openly. His wife raves with jealousy. I am obliged to agree with your determination. But you must marry in our rank—you are poor, yet you have the qualities which all admit in lieu of gold. Do not match yourself with an inferior, for your mother's sake and mine. She was happy because she loved her husband, yet she regretted that she must suffer her daughters to earn their livelihood. She had ambitions for you. She asked me to befriend you, and in time I should have arranged a suitable alliance. I meant to take you to London, where I have many friends. You should have met Englishmen, for I, too, prefer your countrypeople. They are kind, they are faithful, they do not tire so easily as this poor Ivan."

Lota had shrugged her shoulders and rebelled against her old friend's schemes for her welfare. She was romantic enough to be convinced that some day her

ideal lover would present himself, even though she descended in the social scale.

She was very happy in the old château at Saint-Pierre, where Prof. Bonnier's family spent the summer months, and found her element in a musical clique, when they returned to Paris for the winter. She enjoyed the society of other girls more congenial than Marie and Louise, two vapid, sentimental girls of sixteen and eighteen respectively. The French ladies who frequented Mme. Bonnier's salon were loud in their praise of the charming little governess, and the men made much of her, admiring her accomplishments and distinguished manners. She entertained them by her English freedom, while the languid pedantry of the Sorbonne served as the object of her glancing wit.

"What! marry a man you've only seen once or twice, and be compelled to jog along with him all the days of your life, whatever sort of a brute he may prove to be! I'd rather be a rag-picker than sell myself like a bale of silk to the highest bidder in the matrimonial market. One must be desperate indeed to marry for a home. Better to find a refuge in the Morgue. A home, forsooth! A dinner of herbs or a stalled ox? A garret in the Latin quarter and your own precious individuality, or a mansion in the Faubourg St. Martin and a string attached to you when you are sent forth to take part in the puppet-show? Which would you, Rachel, Yvonne, Madeleine?"

Such tirades shocked some of the well-brought-up demoiselles; their brothers laughed at Lota's view of the "grande passion" that must dominate even a poor

student's ménage. She was such a droll, dainty *ingénue* with her sturdy independence and high-flown sentiment. It was evident that she did not know the world in spite of her wise looks.

Lota was too fastidious to be universally popular. She detected pet foibles rather mercilessly, and was fond of good-natured satire. She made fun of the finnicking dilettantes, who studied books and mirrors with equal seriousness, so openly that only vanity hid her ridicule.

"There isn't a man among them all," she wrote to Frances. "They are neat little epitomes of masculine fashion and folly. A good honest *ouvrier* is worth a dozen of them. Need our esteemed friend the Baroness von Peterschon have warned me quite so earnestly of their fascination? I am twenty-three, and of a flinty heart."

Mme. Bonnier had been well pleased that her governess should help to receive her friends and chaperone her daughters, being a woman of little resource or intellect. She encouraged the Professor, an amiable old bookworm, to employ Lota sometimes in his literary work. It was well that she had found a girl, who possessed both brilliant social gifts and a first-rate knowledge of languages. She paid a handsome salary, and expected in return to be relieved of many irksome duties.

It was innocent, tactless Professor Bonnier who first drew his wife's attention to Lota's real standing in their circle.

"She fascinates them all. It is too much. Mlle. Wynne here, Mlle. Wynne there, and always Mlle. Wynne. She will marry soon, and who will then help me with my

papers? The young Faguet is enraptured with her; he works no more at the Sorbonne; he is always in this house. And why? To consult the old professor? To grace Madame's salon? To sing duets with Louise? No! and no a thousand times! It is at Mlle. Wynne that he makes the gentle eyes. We shall lose her. My book will be ruined."

Mme. Bonnier was startled and alarmed. She had selected Alphonse Faguet as her Louise's destined husband. He was rich and eligible in every way; his parents had already hinted that they desired a matrimonial alliance. Fierce anger possessed her mind, as her husband uttered his feeble protestations. Her daughter was neglected for a penniless foreign governess, who had failed to keep her place. Henceforth Mlle. Wynne should be relegated to the background, and watched when she came forward as accompanist and entertainer.

Mme. Bonnier's suspicions were confirmed by various incidents that pointed to Faguet's infatuation for the English girl. He lent her books, he called to practise the violin with her, he besought her to accept flowers and more valuable presents. The fact that Lota received these favours coldly by no means appeased her employer. The seeds of distrust had now been sown; she was ready to believe any evil of a rival to her slighted offspring. Lota was nothing better than an adventuress, she assured herself. The story of the girl's flight from Riga now shed a lurid light on characteristics not hitherto betrayed. Doubtless, the aged baroness

had been deceived also; she had been anxious to recommend her companion to a distant home for excellent reasons.

Thus fortified in her own mind, Mme. Bonnier spoke sharply to Lota, gave her a disagreeable rebuke for accepting an invitation to the house of some English friends, and hinted at grievous offences against *les convenances*.

Lota was nettled by the unjust reproof. She felt a little inclined to give Madame cause for her inquietude, though she disliked the homage of her admirer now that it had increased beyond due limits. If she had not been so triumphantly sure of her own invulnerability, she might have drawn back and evaded notice; but instead, she failed to check Faguet's growing ardour, and gossip made the two its constant theme.

The end of the affair was sufficiently ignominious. Mons. Alphonse Faguet was overpowered by a tempestuous gathering of *parents*, and removed from the danger of an imprudent match, before he had put the finishing touch to his unlucky courtship. Lota despised him for his weak surrender, though she was glad to rid herself of his importunities. She knew that he had brought her into disfavour in her employer's family and also in others, where she had once been a favoured guest.

She devoted herself to the old scholar and won her way back into the good graces of some of her friends, but was never again admitted into a share of Mme. Bonnier's regard Louise had lost a *parti*, who could not easily be replaced.

CHAPTER III

MME. BONNIER'S attitude grew less injured when a new suitor offered himself for Louise. Her maternal pride was soothed as she busied herself with the trousseau. The entire household had been transported to Dinard for the month of August, and at the great white hotel were many English visitors. One of these attached himself to the Bonnier party with the utmost tenacity. He had no other acquaintances and hailed a chance introduction in the Casino with eager delight. The Professor had some vague intention of atoning to Lota for his ill-timed revelations, when he first presented the Irish surgeon to the ladies.

"I like this doctor," he told her with artless commendation. "He is honest and talks only of what he knows. If that is horses and dogs in general, what matter? We do not all care for books."

Lota chanced to hear some further praise, which amused her mightily. She had been dancing with the doctor and found him but a sorry partner.

"A pretty pair, those two," the savant was pointing them out to an old crony, who watched the gay scene with dismal consciousness of wasted hours. "He is fine, blond, voyant." The Professor's English rarely sustained him through a sentence. "She so elegant, dark, spirituelle. I am happy to have rendered him a service in return for his help with my little spaniel. He

is mending the poor Mignon's leg; she hardly suffers a stranger's touch, but she licks the Doctor Graham's hands."

Lota, laughing at the Professor's generous amends, looked at her partner mischievously. He had an absurdly heavy bearing in contrast with the French element of the assembly. He seemed dazed by the constant vivacity of the faces round him. How delicious of old Bonnier to imagine that she could possibly fall in love with such a dull dragoon of a man! She, who delighted in badinage and the sharp war of wits, in which only a nimble brain can excel.

"You don't like these people. Why do you stay at Dinard?" she asked him, anxious to find out the real motive for his continued attendance. "Is the roulette table fatally attractive?"

He laughed awkwardly. "I have a flutter now and then, but I get sick of the confounded ball going round and round, and those nonsensical painted horses. If you've seen a real race, you wouldn't bet much on them. These French chaps like toys better than good sport."

"Then you won't stay here long, since the life palls?" she rejoined.

"I'll stay for the expedition to Mont St Michel," he said. "I ought to go this week but somehow I feel I must do that old place, and Mme. Bonnier was kind enough to ask me to join her party. Perhaps you'll put me up to some of the lingo. I don't understand a word these guides say."

Lota was by no means pleased to hear of this addition

to their number. She was already weary of Dr Graham's trite conversation. His accent smote uncouthly on her ear for it was not the pure liquid of Ireland proper, but a form of Celtic dialect common to Ulster. The glorious sunlit day, however, dispelled her bad humour marvellously. The journey by boat and train was gay with the mirth of holiday adventure. As the dim outline of the Mount spread before them from the southern side, Lota's eyes dilated. She forgot the society of the burdensome Irishman and the surveillance of Mme. Bonnier, while her mind was filled with visions of "old, unhappy, far-off things" and the strange pageant of history. Its wonderful aloofness from the busy present struck her with a kind of awe. It had survived centuries of storm and stress, it had withstood countless sieges; hearts had broken within its prisons, kings had made merry in the halls of its great abbey. The dread secrets of the fortress oppressed her as she recalled woful stories of prisoners, who cast themselves from its cruel custody into destruction.

"En bas, c'est la mouvante lize,
Le château fort et sa prison . . .
En haut c'est l' immuable église
Avec sa magique chanson."

She repeated Botrel's verse, forgetting that her neighbour understood the lines imperfectly.

"Ah, yes! wonderful old show, isn't it?" he responded amiably. "How curious to see all those sheep feeding near the water! I suppose this was an island once."

"I wish it were now!" Lota broke out almost passionately. They were approaching the end of the "Digue" and a stream of motor-cars preceded them. "How I hate those Americans flying about with their wretched guide-books! I am going to sketch by myself somewhere, if I can escape."

Mme. Bonnier called her at that moment and explained that everyone was inclined to patronise the famous Poulard omelette before beginning to mount the countless steps to the "abbaye." They passed through the archways, under which the devout pilgrim of the Middle Age had passed—noble, bourgeois, peasant, prince—St Michel had drawn them to implore his aid. They had come from strange lands, with bleeding feet, to force their way past the stern sentinels of the gate. The house of Tiphanie, sorceress and hero's wife, standing far back in the narrow street, lured Lota onwards. She had faint desire for the déjeuner, which attracted those insensible to poetic associations. She passed swiftly on among the crowd of tourists and mounted the worn steps to the ramparts, where she found a sheltered seat. She had visited the ancient church and heard long dissertations on the marvels of its architecture, she knew by heart the tortuous corridors and spacious halls and dismal cells. She disliked the idea of following a guide in the company of open-mouthed multitudes. She should be stifled in the narrow stairways, while out here the golden sunshine played lightly on the water. They would come to see the tide leap treacherously around the island, when they had made the tour of the shops and "done" the other

sights. She had treated Dr Graham rather badly, but, somehow, to-day he was positively abhorrent to her. He represented the tangible and modern at a time when she chose to dwell among dream-mysteries of the past. Happy Tiphanie looking with eyes of divination at the stars by moonlight, while brave Du Guesclin watched by her side! She envied the woman, whose name had survived the oblivion of centuries. She, too, hoped to glory in the renown of an heroic husband. "Only there are so few heroes nowadays," she reflected. "Faguet was a poltroon, and the Count was a bully. I seem to attract the weaker make of men. How are they enjoying their omelette, I wonder? I am glad I am not with them in that crowded salle-à-manger with the motley collection of good, bad and indifferent sketches on the walls."

She gave herself up to the whim of the moment and let her fancy wander among the past. Far out beyond her stood the Bay of Cancale and the towers of St Malo. A fisherman was the only figure on the stretch of sand. Peace and silence and solitude—she bathed herself in them luxuriously, putting aside all thoughts of her duty to Mme. Bonnier.

A group of noisy tourists disturbed her reverie. "We've got the loveliest pottery with pictures on it of the kings of England. It's copied from the Bayeux tapestry, and it's only eighteen francs the plate. Do look at that girl in the Normandy coiffe; ain't she sweet? We'll go and have tea right there under those awnings. I guess we shan't get our Babas, though."

They trooped on and Lota closed her eyes with a frown of disgust. She was snatching this moment of freedom with childish wilfulness. She would apologise prettily to them all when she rejoined them. She had her sketch-book—she would try to catch the strange grey of the landscape and the aged buildings that the brilliant sun failed to gild.

Her brush worked with feverish activity. She was an artist of no mean skill and the picture grew rapidly under her touch. She had rarely felt in the mood for painting since she left Leipzig. Marie daubed under her instruction, but she seldom opened her own colour box. She felt that she must carry that scene away with her, that the time would come when she should long to bring back the memory of those grey ramparts and the hour of solitude.

The sun set and the water was now rippling gently round her. There had been a low tide. Few visitors had cared to watch it. As she finished her sketch, Lota became conscious that the air was chill.

She looked at her watch and started up in horror. Five o'clock and she had meant to return to her friends at three! The professor's family were leaving Dinard the next morning and her help would be wanted with the packing when they returned to the hotel. If she had to take a later train Mme. Bonnier would scold her as if she were a witless serving-maid. She gathered her sketching materials together and ran down the steps to the narrow street. She almost ran into the arms of a man who was slowly ascending them.

"Miss Wynne! What luck! We've been searching everywhere for you. It's nearly seven o'clock."

"Nearly seven! Then my watch has stopped. Have the others gone on to the train?"

"They've gone *off* in it. Mme. Bonnier was in rather a wax and would have it that you'd left the Mount first. Said you'd been here so often that you were bored by it and wanted distraction in another quarter. I must say I've drawn it now, thought I'd drawn it blank till I met you. Have you had tea?"

"I don't want any, thank you. When is the next train?" She was hurt and angry that they had left her to Dr Graham's escort.

"There isn't another from here but we can drive to Pontorson. It is the most outlandish place. You'd better come and ask the people at the hotel about the train-service. I'm sorry but I couldn't make myself understood."

He possessed himself of her sketch-book and walked by her side with an air of pompous protection, which would have amused her at another moment.

The crooked, picturesque street was deserted. Already the shops were closed and the cafés filled with the inhabitants of the town. An odd sense of loneliness crept over Lota suddenly. She felt as though she had been deserted by her friends for ever and left to the mercy of a chance acquaintance. Some mocking memory brought back to her mind the old philosopher's words: "We are better in company of a knowne dogge than in a man's societie, whose speech is unknowne to us."

To avoid the weary chatter of this Irishman's tongue, she had sought solitude ; now she must pay for her brief respite by a long, dull tête-à-tête. She rallied her spirits and began to point out various objects of interest on the way to the hotel. He seemed to listen gratefully, assuming an eager curiosity. He had brought a cloak for her, which she suffered him to wrap round her shoulders. There was something in the way this slight service was rendered that touched her. He was clumsy but his kindliness was practical and honest.

" I remembered that you wore a light dress," he said, ' and that the night is always cold, after these continental blazes."

" You are accustomed to look after careless people," she said, laughing.

" Not at all," he rejoined bluntly. " I have only two sisters and they look after me. The eldest is such a good sort. She has kept house for me ever since our mother died ten years ago. Poor little Jeanie."

A softness in his voice now reminded her of his origin. His face with the hard outline and high cheek-bones was of Scotch contour but into the steel-blue eyes a deeper hue had infused beauty, born of Hibernian soil alone. A slight interest in his character awakened. Lota had always been fond of studying her fellow-men, but was impatient of the commonplace. Her life had been too vivid with adventure and rapid change to admit of the schoolgirl simplicity, which in some women lasts to middle age. She criticised rather sharply a foible that showed want of breeding, a taste that inclined to the florid.

The news at the hotel was disquieting. Monsieur could obtain a carriage and a pair of horses that would carry him to Pontorson, but he would not find a train there. It was impossible to reach Dinard that night. Repeated questions in other quarters confirmed the information. The situation was sharply defined at last.

" It is no good," Lota said quietly. " We can either stay here or stay at Pontorson. Which shall it be? The accommodation here is fairly good and we should only arrive there at eleven o'clock. It is a long drive."

Lota was outwardly calm but her heart was bursting with shame and indignation. Had she been alone, she should scarcely have regretted the predicament. It would have been a wonderful chance of seeing the sun rise on Mont. St. Michel. She wished the Irish doctor had not formed the tiresome project of remaining behind to look for her.

Dr Graham was twisting his great auburn moustache in perplexity.

" It is awkward," he said. " We'd better stop in this place, as far as I can see."

" You might go on," she began, with a feeling of relief. " You know now that I am safe."

" I would rather stay," he answered quickly. " I might not get taken in at the other place and I'd be quite stranded as I can't speak the language. Let me order dinner. The lunch was one of the best I ever had."

Lota was hungry and enjoyed the excellent fish and game provided, but towards the end of the meal, she began to feel conscious of embarrassment. Dr Graham

drank more than one bottle of wine and talked noisily of Mme. Bonnier's chagrin.

"All her fault," he repeated. "She would have it that you had gone. When I see her again, I shall tell her not to be too sure another time."

"She ought to have seen all her party on the train, as it was the last," Lota said, trying to stop her companion's eloquence. "But I suppose she did not realise it. Can we not telegraph now?"

"Too late. I asked before. Try some of this claret. It's not bad for a little one-horse place like this." He emptied another bottle, filling her glass despite remonstrances.

Lota was annoyed by his growing familiarity. Her faint liking for him vanished. She became conscious that many curious glances were levelled at them by the other guests. Most of these were French tourists in motoring dress, loud, impudent, swaggering in manner. One man, however, sat apart at a private table and did not dine. He had writing materials before him and a leather wallet. A faint perfume of rice-paper had reached Lota's nostrils as she passed the table. Early Indian days had been brought back to her by that subtle fragrance. He was an Englishman beyond a doubt—spare, clean-shaven, reserved of aspect. A keen pair of eyes flashed wide open once and Lota caught a glance of sympathy, comprehension, she hardly knew what. The stranger guessed her secret heart-sickness and pitied her. So much she saw before the face was averted from her. Who was he? A writer perhaps, who wandered

for the sake of copy, a scholar studying antiquities. There was the stamp of refinement on every trait. Lota mentally contrasted him with George Graham, now flushed with wine and more fatuous in speech than ever.

"I will go to my room," she said rising. "Good-night. I will be ready for an early start."

"What! Off so soon? Good-night, then." He shook hands and insisted on accompanying her to the door. The man at the writing-table looked up as they passed. An uneasy cloud had settled on his fine, open face. He paused in his writing and leaned back, thinking deeply.

CHAPTER IV

DR GRAHAM and his companion left St. Michel at daybreak the next morning. Lota looked back as the train started for a last glimpse of the fortress, which now held for her a repellent fascination. She had been its prisoner for one night and now, though she was regaining her freedom, the fetters still seemed to cling about her wrists. A few hours' irresponsible yielding to its charm had brought bitter repentance. She felt that the cold grey morning aspect would always remain in the pictures engraved on her mind rather than the glory of summer splendour, which had wrought a spell for romance.

She was glad that the long, warm cloak protected her from the cool breeze. She needed the comforts of physical well-being to maintain her fortitude. She dreaded Mme. Bonnier's storm of question and reproof. The yoke of servitude galled her pride. She would have to submit to an unreasonable woman's reproaches in silence ; she had never suffered domination easily.

The hotel was only just astir when they reached Dinard and a sleepy man-servant admitted them.

Mme. Bonnier was summoned for Lota wished to get the scene over as soon as possible. She had dismissed Dr Graham against his own wish. There should not be a witness to her humiliation.

Mme. Bonnier bustled in, a ludicrous figure in peignoir

and papillotes. Her expression was harder than Lota had ever seen it and there was malice in her first words.

"So you have at last returned!" she spoke with a kind of exultant irony. "And you still think that I will receive you after such an episode. What went on before I forgave for my husband's sake, and that my daughters might not sully their minds by suspicions of the truth; but this—this is too much. You are bold, Miss Wynne. You would brave out this adventure. But never! never!" She lost control of herself, flinging words at Lota, that made the girl sink down on a chair, dazed by horrified wonder. The cruel voice struck into her comprehension at last. Down, down to the depths of an unseen abyss she seemed to have been thrust, far from the old bright world where existence had been possible. Madame's voice became shriller as it met with no response. She passed into a violent strain of reproach, hurling the most perverted charges at her silent victim. A long train of schemes and intrigues was held to have led up to a trap for the latest man, who had made her acquaintance. She was designing, ungrateful, false, no fit person to have the care of young girls. Never had Madame's confidence been so misplaced, her trust so betrayed.

A storm of sobs shook the rustling papillotes as Madame gave way to hysterics. The gaudy, gilded salon ceased to echo to her words. Lota hardened into an unnatural calm. When the excited Frenchwoman dried her tears, she stood up and confronted her sternly.

"I am leaving your service for ever," she said slowly. "Some day you may come to regret the wrong you have

done me. I am an unprotected girl in a foreign country. You should have extended your hand to me in pity, even if you believed the monstrous charge you have dared to utter."

The elder woman cowered and muttered a whining accusation. "You were always ready. You can defend yourself well."

"I do not want defence. I demand only justice," Lota replied; her head was throbbing and she felt stifled by the sordid atmosphere. She could not maintain her proud composure much longer now that the cruel torture of the lash had stung her spirit. A dreadful fear that fierce wrath, if goaded into madness, might drive her to some act of vengeance sent her swiftly out of the hotel into the gay streets of Dinard, now preparing for the day's festivity. The fête of flowers was to be held that morning she remembered. That was why they were hanging out the trails of paper roses and the tricoloured flags.

> "It was roses, roses all the way
> With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
> The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
> The church-spires flamed, such flags they had."

The lines buzzed in her brain as she wandered among the glittering shops. The sea was not very far off—it shone in the distance with a brilliant tint, that foretold intense heat. The sea! Her thoughts turned her half-unconsciously in that direction, away from the curious gaze of passers-by. The wild, hunted expression of her eyes struck on George Graham relentlessly when he

met her at a sharp turning from the main street. She would have rushed past him if he had not stopped her by a detaining hand on her arm. The change in Lota Wynne aroused a different chivalry from that which had shown itself before in officious acts of deference.

"Where are you going?" He asked the question without a trace of his former suavity, rather as he would have spoken to some lost child.

"Nowhere! Anywhere! To the sea!" She spoke in quick gasps, turning her head from side to side to avoid his scrutiny.

"Then come with me and have some coffee. I know a quiet place where you will be able to rest. You are tired and cold." The authority of manner was unexpected. She yielded to it without question, suffering herself to be led to a small café close by. The fire burned brightly in an inner room, the crockery was clean and delicate.

"This isn't a grand room but it's homely, isn't it?" George Graham said cheerfully. "Now, take off your cloak and sit by the fire."

Lota had no power to resist. Her will had ceased to sustain her and the clear reason, which had led her through difficulties without scathe. She only knew that life was stripped of its illusions and stretched bare, ugly, cruel before her, without pleasure or pain. A wrong had been inflicted on her wantonly and now she was reckoned among that half-world of infamy and degradation, into which she had only cast the fearful glance of innocent girlhood. "An outcast from decent society." The

words reiterated themselves again and again in her ear. She had been wont to associate the term dimly with a woman in tawdry finery, gliding along the darker side of the boulevard or issuing with brazen gaiety from some doubtful restaurant. She shuddered and gave a startled cry of horror as she caught a reflection of herself in an ornamental mirror. The dainty white muslin dress was crushed and soiled, the great befeathered hat had an air of swaggering impudence above her disarranged hair.

She put both hands before her face to shut out the sight and turned away trembling in every limb.

George Graham, returning with coffee, thought he had never seen so piteous a transformation from careless youth to haggard age, when he contrasted the Lota of that hour with the girl, who had set out on the pleasure party the day before. He had been wont to depend on her for counsel in matters, where he knew himself ignorant and gauche; he had admired half-enviously the confidence and decision of character shown even in trivial acts.

Lota drank some of the coffee and leant forward over the table, her drooping attitude induced by some mental relaxation. Her head sank between her arms, the heavy coils of hair seeming to weight her slender neck too heavily. She did not want to finish her meal and go out into the streets again. She was incapable of any action.

The doctor strode up and down, fuming with rage. He longed to sally forth to the destruction of the entire Bonnier household. He guessed what had happened, and was beside himself as he realised the part he had

played in Lota Wynne's ruin. His fists closed and his teeth set grimly as he pictured the scene which had occurred. He had never trusted foreigners—they were a treacherous, shallow lot. Their notions of morality were strange indeed, when they cast out innocent girls from their houses through mere jealousy and spite. Lota's beauty, he doubted little, had made enemies, even while she charmed. The plain daughters would pass unnoticed when the charming English companion accompanied them. Any fool could have seen that Madame Bonnier had little affection in her nature towards a possible rival to Louise, but who would have imagined that the dull, respectable old frump would prove to be such an absolutely callous slanderer?

Taking advantage of a brief rally of Lota's self-possession, he persuaded her to take refuge in a quiet pension. "We can talk later, when you have slept, and when I have seen that Frenchwoman," he said.

"You are going to see her?" A burning tide of colour swept from brow to chin and then receded suddenly. After all, he was so inevitably concerned in this episode that it mattered little what he heard. He knew the truth and might obtain a retraction.

Lota lay down quietly enough on the narrow, canopied bed. She washed her face and hands but she had not a single change of raiment. She imagined herself dressing day by day in the gay summer attire till it became the draggled raiment of the poorer courtesan. What was she to do? Where was she to go? She would never clear herself by repeating that odious story to her friend.

Pride cast her back on herself, with this wound hidden in her breast and quivering still.

Late in the afternoon when the fashionable world of Dinard was at its merriest, George Graham drove up with her trunk. She made a rapid change of toilette and descended to give audience, still pale and heavy-eyed, but in saner mood. The doctor handed her a sealed packet with something of a flourish. "I thought that wretched woman would cave in when she had a man to deal with," he said, grim lines about his mouth.

The packet contained an abject apology, evidently dictated, and a cheque for fifty pounds. Lota tore them both across and thrust the torn paper into the grate.

"So much for Mme. Bonnier," she said. Her neck reared with one of the proud, queen-like movements that betrayed its grace, her head with the glistening brown coronet was thrown back defiantly.

"That's right!" said the doctor in loud approval, but secretly he was horrified at this rejection of good money. It had taken him a long time to obtain so large a sum from Mme. Bonnier. He had hoped that he ensured Lota's peace of mind by the donation. Money could salve many ills in his prudent Scotch estimation. But another expedient sprang into being fully matured. If Lota had accepted this sum and rejoined her friends, he might never have dared to speak. He had always known that this distinguished, beautiful woman did not quite look upon him as her equal—he had acquiesced in her opinion humbly. He began to speak at length

in a hurried, nervous way, pulling at the tassel of a blind and looking out into the quiet street. He feared to meet indignant wonder in the dark eyes, which made him strangely conscious of distance and disdain.

"I know it isn't what you have a right to expect, Miss Wynne; I'm not a rich man and I've never been in what you'd call good society, though most people at Ballymore would be proud to know my wife. If you'd had a home or friends, I would have gone away without ever telling you how much I admired you, but now you may have a hard life before you. If you marry me, I swear that you shall never hear that woman's fabrication again. It is the best thing for you, I honestly believe. Will you honour me by receiving my protection? I'm a rough sort of chap, but you'd be in honourable hands at least. No Graham ever injured his own kin or did a dirty trick to any woman." A memory of Frenchmen he had met in his student days came into his mind, as he turned to where Lota sat in a rigid attitude, new to her rich vitality.

"You are very kind," she faltered at last. "I can never thank you enough for your generosity; but it wouldn't be fair to let you saddle yourself with me for ever, just because chance flung me upon you for a while." She was touched by his eager upholding of her, and his strength tempted her loneliness. She did not know in that hour of desolation how she should dare to face the world again without friend or protector. If he really liked her before, as he protested, she might fulfil the duties of a wife to a man who shielded her reputation

jealously. She would pay a heavy price to regain the fair name she had lost.

George pleaded his suit earnestly while her thoughts went seeking for another way of escape. His real ardour perhaps influenced her more than she realised. The belief that she was still desirable in any man's eyes restored her self-respect in some degree. She consented to become his wife with the first faint hope kindled within her despairing heart. Let them get far away together over the seas to this remote island, which was to be their home. There could be no further wooing—the deed was irrevocable after her first surrender. She was as anxious as he to accomplish the necessary ceremonies, that bound two chance voyagers into eternal unity.

CHAPTER V

THE sun streaming in at the long, narrow windows of the Octagon House aroused Lota to a guilty sense of having overslept herself in a strange house. Her watch testified to the lateness of the hour as well as the bright October morning.

She sprang out of bed, and, with newly-awakened interest in her surroundings, peered through the blinds into Featherstone Place. Immediately in front rose the sloping street which led to the post-office, the market, and the principal shops. To right and left branched cross-roads, down which the farm-people drove on Saturdays in primitive red carts with wheels, that heralded their approach by a continuous, grinding squeak. Behind the house, a magnificent avenue of oaks led to Castle O'Shaughnessy, a modest stone building of no great size. The Octagon House commanded a view of the O'Shaughnessy Arms also, and stared out of countenance a handsome Bank of Ulster.

This many-gabled, weather-beaten residence stood indeed at the very heart of Ballymore. Up and down from the station jangled a perpetual stream of outside carts, drawn by the dashing thoroughbred horses, typical of the northern counties. In summer, the square was crowded with cattle and horses at fair-times, and formed a fashionable promenade for the youth of the town. Riders and foot-passengers from north, south, east, and

west must perforce pass under the scrutiny of the red-blinded window through which the bride was peering. But it was Sunday, and few ventured abroad at ten o'clock. Only a stray Sunday-school teacher straggled past, or a few belated milk-carts.

Lota began to brush out the hair that hung round her in a cloud, falling far below her knees. A tap at the door heralded a maid carrying a breakfast tray.

"Och thin, it's plinty ye have!" she exclaimed, gazing open-mouthed at the vision. "But it isn't Oirish ye are, surely, with thim eyes."

Her broad, pleasant face had a kindly welcome in its expression. She looked at Lota with interrogation on every lineament. Lota was surprised at the familiarity of the tone, which was one of absolute cameraderie; but the woman was middle-aged and apparently meant nothing by her freedom. Lota was fain to smile in return, and thus made a willing slave of one member of the household. Biddy M'Grady had an eye for smiles and their revelations. She would have been quick to detect constraint or derisive condescension.

"The doctor's gone out to Ballynagill," she observed, watching Lota's movements greedily, "but he'll be back in time for church. Miss Jean and Miss Kate are thrying on their new hats. There goes Molly M'Bride, the young divil. Sure, she's had that dress four years and she wid money of her own. That's Mr Crawford's dog-cart coming down the Cushengairn road, and that's his sister in the red velvet bonnet trimmed with bugles."

Lota recognised the man she had met the previous

evening in stiff black clothes, that did not suit him so well as the rough tweeds he had worn.

"What time does the service begin?" she asked, feeling some trepidation. "It is half-past ten already."

"Och! The Crawfords are Episcopalians," Biddy said with a touch of contempt. "They begin at eleven and First Ballymore at twelve-half."

Lota finished her breakfast amidst a series of introductions and comments from the maid, who retained her station at the window and regarded with breathless interest the attire of every woman who passed before her range of vision. She was amused by Biddy's frank speech, though it was something of a sting to her pride. She had never been accosted with so little respect by an inferior.

She ran downstairs to the dining-room, where Miss Jean sat primly reading a book of paraphrases. The other sister was in the window that commanded Ballymore society, watching with an eagerness, akin to Biddy's, the members of the Episcopalian church now swarming to the place of worship. Both greeted Lota civilly and inquired after her comfort. She had to acknowledge that she had slept little.

"Sure, it's always the same here on a Saturday night," Kate said, mentally valuing Lota's French gown. "Most of the farmers get drunk after the market and the Ballymore men make a night of it too. Mrs M'Ginty's public-house is just down there," she nodded in the direction of an innocent-seeming cottage with white curtains, "and the screeching when she turns them out

at twelve is awful. The O'Shaughnessy Arms is pretty bad, but a different class it is that goes there. Did Biddy tell you she'd seen Crawford hoisted on to his car as full as he could hold on Saturday?" She turned to Jean, who shook her head.

"Perhaps you'd like to go round the house with my sister. She's always done the housekeeping." Kate eyed her sister-in-law curiously. Her figure was hardly in keeping with the dingy room, furnished rather barely in the style of a preceding generation. Lota was gazing abstractedly at two oil paintings suspended above the mantel-piece on either side of a lurid representation of Satan, literally clothed in darkness.

"My father and mother," Jean explained. Graham père had cultivated side whiskers and other evidences of solid respectability. The red-and-white smiling countenance of his spouse bore a more striking resemblance to George, though he had not inherited her ringlets.

"There will be wool mats and crocheted antimacassars in the drawing-room," Lota assured herself desperately, "and that dreadful ancestress with the very low neck and the pantalettes must have worked canvas atrocities when she wasn't sitting under an impossible tree, toying with the pink parasol fringed in green." The heavy mahogany furniture of this room might be tolerated, if certain hangings were removed, but one would always have to sit by the window to avoid the contemplation of such ornaments as should have laid up everlasting torment for the deviser.

Miss Jean led the way across a narrow hall to the best room, which was seldom used unless she entertained a guest. It was even worse than Lota had anticipated. The chairs were covered in blue rep so glaring that it had obviously been preserved in brown holland, the little tables dotted sparsely at intervals were filled with plantations of photo-frames and cheap vases containing dried grasses. The fire-place was guarded by a gaudy cardboard screen painted by Kate in a paroxysm of artistic fervour. The carpet vied with the wall-paper in the faithful reproduction of nightmare tulips and roses many-hued.

Lota steered a perilous course through milking-stools, tied up with ribbon and poker-work chairs, not destined for weight, to the window, which looked without apology into a solicitor's office.

"Is it too late for flowers?" she asked drearily.

"The garden isn't much," Miss Jean apologised. "It's so small that it isn't worth while to pay a gardener and none of us have cared to undertake it."

Lota began to examine some of the photographs, afraid of betraying her consternation. They were chiefly the work of local artists and did not flatter the subjects beyond recognition. Lota, recognising George in early infancy, suppressed a laugh and took up a cabinet placed in splendid isolation on the mantel-shelf.

"Who is this?" she asked, with an access of interest. "I am sure I see a likeness to someone I know." Indeed, the handsome bored face with its sharp-cut features and cynical mouth seemed to look at her that moment with a

friendly gaze. She fancied that the eyes followed her about the room with good-humoured sympathy.

"That is Mr Gerald Muir, a nephew of the resident magistrate of Ballymore," Miss Jean said, dusting a china vase in momentary forgetfulness of the Sabbath.

Lota returned the photograph to its place and sighed. George's step was echoing along the flagged path that connected the surgery with the rest of the house. He met them as they left the drawing-room and took Lota's arm.

"Well, no Bluebeard's chambers," he remarked jocularly. "You shall have the keys without reservation when you take over the housekeeping from Jeanie here." His hand touched Jean's shoulder with a heavy caress, meant to dull the edge of words, which might seem cruel.

Lota saw Miss Jean's faded eyes fill with tears. It became clear to her that she had spoilt several lives because her own had been in jeopardy.

"I hope that your sister will not leave us," she said quickly. "You would find me a very inefficient successor. We cannot spare you, Miss Jean." She smiled down on the elder woman with the sunny, frank sincerity that was part of her rare attraction. Her sister-in-law choked down a sob.

"You will get on without me," she said. "I have always wished my brother to marry. He has chosen very happily." The generous words cost the poor soul a struggle. It was true that she had held herself ever in readiness to yield up her place as châtelaine, but she

had expected a simple country-town damsel, who would look on the Octagon House as a palace of treasures. She had apprehended that Lota was accustomed to different surroundings. "It will come to you in time," she added. "I don't think I was any older when my mother died."

"I am twenty-three—old enough for any useful purpose," Lota declared, a sinking in her heart at the thought of becoming a model helpmate. "I have never cooked or washed or spring-cleaned, but one can learn to do anything after four years under Hermann of Leipzig."

"You are a musician. You will need a new piano, I am afraid. Ours is sadly out of tune, for we have never cared for music."

"We shall have to get a lot of new things for the house," George said complacently. He enjoyed this new rôle of married man excessively, whenever his glance rested on the elegant figure of his wife. "We've rubbed along well enough, but I've been busy working up the practice and Kate is such a gad-about and you such a stay-at-home that we've never entertained as we ought. Now, it will be different, eh, Mrs Graham ?"

And Lota, conjuring up a mental picture of solitary connubialities in the sordid rooms at Featherstone Place, assented very readily.

They set out to church in some state amidst a heterogeneous flock of worshippers. At the top of Malone Street, First Ballymore turned off to the left while the less godly but more fashionable Episcopalian brethren hurried on to St Patrick's weather-beaten fane.

The service was dull and quite unrelieved by any instrumental music, for the tenets of this particular church were of the strictest. Lota was chiefly engaged in trying to follow the movements of her neighbours, lest she should betray a mortifying ignorance of her husband's denomination. Though devoid of self-consciousness, she could not but perceive that the Graham family pew was the point to which all eyes strayed in preference to the minister's forum. The air was heavy with peppermint when the sermon began, and the more youthful part of the congregation chewed without intermission throughout the service. Lota paid but indifferent heed to the droning discourse delivered by the Rev. Donald Macrae. She felt again an alien among aliens, untouched at heart by the bare rigidity of these Lutheran exercises. The pealing of wonderful organ notes, the solemn glory of architecture, the beauty of peace and harmony combined had drawn her to the Catholic Church, but in reality she was of no particular creed. A wanderer from childhood, she had been suffered to learn the lesson of the world as her own spirit conceived of it. Neither parent had ever done more than inculcate the broad principles of morality. She worshipped at the altars of pagan deities, for thither her first aspirations had been directed. She adored heroism, genius, perfection of form rather than duty, faith and sacrifice.

The final paraphrase was chanted at last, wofully out of tune, and Mr Macrae announced a series of pastoral visits for the week. He was waiting at the door when

they passed out, an odd, sturdy man, in black gown and Geneva bands. Lota acquitted herself well in that and other introductions which followed. She managed to be pleasant and cordial even to matrons of sour countenance and patronising manners. A pallid young man was presented as Mr Patrick Kelly, and a sotto voce explanation of George's added the further information that he was Kate's affianced husband.

Mr Patrick Kelly accompanied them to the Octagon House as did Mr Crawford, who was full of jests regarding his friend's slyness. "Next time you go to fetch a wife perhaps you'll tell us, George. Ah! you've broken many hearts in Ballymore, Mrs Graham." He continued in an effusive strain of banter and compliment till they reached the gate. A groom was driving a restive horse at a slow pace down the street. Mr Crawford raised his hat with a flourish, shook hands and jumped on to his car with remarkable agility.

"My sister will call on you next week," he said to Lota. "She is longing to make your acquaintance."

Kate interrupted unceremoniously. "My sister-in-law's day is Friday," she announced. "She will be pleased to see Miss Crawford then."

"You didn't mind my telling him, I hope," she said, as the car drove off. "We can't have people trooping in every afternoon of the week and we all have regular days for calling, everybody who is anybody, of course. Friday will be best for you because the Macraes have Tuesday, and the Dunbars Thursday, and a lot of people go to town on Wednesday. There's a cheap train."

"Everybody who is anybody." The phrase struck Lota with curious humour. "I am neither somebody nor nobody at Ballymore. I am anybody." She played a vivid waltz of Chopin after the mid-day meal, unable to bear the tide of local trivialities any longer.

"We do not care for music which is not sacred on this day," Miss Jean ventured with timid fortitude.

George, however, hushed the remark and paid lavish praises to his bride. She would be the queen of Ballymore society, he had been assured by Crawford, who was as good a judge of a woman's points as George himself was of a horse's claims to pedigree.

CHAPTER VI

THE morning of the eventful Friday dawned crisp and bright, with a touch of sharpness in the air, that set Lota's heart pulsing impatiently. It was too tiresome to settle down to a solemn conclave with Kate on questions of etiquette—she must be out in the October sunshine. George marked her eager eyes as he made ready for a country visit.

"Come round to the stables and see the horses," he suggested. "I've plenty of time—it isn't a matter of life and death whether Mrs O'Flynn's rheumatism is discussed at ten or eleven o'clock. You look as if you were spoiling for a gallop. Can you ride?"

"I used to when I was in India," Lota answered, "but I don't know that I should be a match for Diana. She has a wicked head."

"She's a thoroughbred," George replied complacently. "She's got blue blood in her, that little mare. She's worth just double what I gave for her at Cushengorm fair two years ago. If you'd like a horse, I can get one more suited to carry a lady. There are grand rides about Ballymore and you'll get sick of the girls' chatter."

There were three horses in the stable and one prancing wildly in a meadow behind the house with a groom on its back, reckoned second to George Graham only as a horseman and trainer. Lota's genuine appreciation of the different merits pointed out in each horse led her

husband into a detailed account of the noble animals he meant to send to Dublin the next year. Lota began to see the drift of many condolences offered the doctor by Alan Crawford and other sporting friends for having missed the great event of the year. "Lost your record as a prize-winner at the show—hope you've done well in the matrimonial market. We were all of us alarmed, my boy, when you didn't turn up at the end of August. We said you must be in prison or in love."

There was a virile strength about Dr Graham in his tight riding-boots and full covert coat, that had been lacking when he was out of his true element. He was really at ease as he examined his "cattle" and dilated on their excellent breed. They all knew his footstep and answered to his voice but one kicked out viciously at his companion.

"Don't touch that horse," George exclaimed, drawing Lota away from the stall occupied by a magnificent bay with proudly arched neck and straining eyes. "Sindbad will take a lot of breaking in, but he has points that Alan Crawford's best can't beat, and he considers his stable the cream of the north of Ireland. He keeps a pack of grooms to exercise them, for he doesn't often ride himself—hasn't a steady enough hand to manage the dangerous animals. Come now, let's make a bargain. I'll get a side-saddle and take you out on Chloe the next day I'm free. I can see you'll make a good horsewoman." He took in her well-knit frame and strong, shapely hands with keen satisfaction. She would provoke as much admiration on horseback as in a draw-

ing-room, and even his horsiest companions could not disapprove his choice, if she showed herself akin to him in tastes and accomplishments. Lota was experiencing the first real pleasure, that had stirred her pulse since the picnic at Saint-Michel. A new piano and a horse like one of these! She could surely bear with dulness and exile, if such alleviations were within her reach, and discontent might be banished when she was once in the saddle with similar untamed life beneath.

"Thank you ever so much," she said; but she did not offer to kiss him as he had half hoped. "I shall simply love it. Do let me try that beautiful creature who wanted to kick me. I don't want too quiet a horse."

George smiled rather grimly.

"No woman could ride the brute just yet," he said. "He hasn't had a saddle on his back yet. I'm going to enter him for the High Jump at the Whitsun races. He killed two of the last owner's men and broke the back of a third."

Lota shuddered at the simple statement George gave so carelessly. Miss Jean had already entreated her to restrain her husband from dangerous feats of horsemanship.

"Perhaps he will give up some of the races now that he's married and has someone else to consider; but, my dear, he has risked his neck from a child and boasts that he's never been thrown while many a friend has been brought home from the field on a stretcher. It's the curse of Ballymore, this reckless riding and betting. It leads to drink and low company and wild, unsettled

habits of life. Mr Crawford is given up to the bottle. I wish that George and he had not become so intimate, but they are always on the look-out for the finest horses and both of them take a pride in their stable. When I heard from my brother that he was going to marry, I prayed that he might be led into more godly ways."

Lota had been impressed by Miss Jean's sincerity and had promised to counteract the attractions of fair and hunting-field, but now she decided that the prim, elder sister was unnecessarily anxious, and she sang with a lilt of joy the chorus of "John Peel," as George mounted and rode off.

The women-folk were in the kitchen intent on household affairs. She entered with sparkling eyes and ruffled hair to encounter a glance of disapproval from Kate, and a grin of pleasure from the handmaid, Biddy. "The masther's pleased her, thin," said the latter to herself, "and why shouldn't he, such a fine bhoy too. There's plinty of disappointed women in Ballymore—we'll have 'em all about our ears this day."

"What are you going to wear?" Kate asked abruptly. She took in all the weekly magazines of fashion and represented the social element at the Octagon House. She was jealous of her sister-in-law but she wanted her to make an impression on the callers, who had been wont to snub the doctor's ladies.

"I shall wear my cream dress," Lota said, after a moment's reflection. "It's quite the choicest garment I possess. I didn't have a proper trousseau, you see—

we were married in such a hurry." She wondered how much they knew of her history and her courtship. What did they think of her, these two women, who were soon to be driven from their home to make way for her? A penniless adventuress, who had schemed to gain a husband? A foolish little nobody picked up in the street and clinging in sheer desperation to the hand that had been generously extended to her? She remembered now that she had not received presents, that she came dowerless to take all that had been stored by past generations. The sisters were polishing silver-urns and teapots and spoons. She took a curiously wrought cup in her hands and examined it, her mind busy with fresh thoughts of shame.

"What a beautiful piece of silver!" she said, "and how well kept! Not a scratch or stain on it in spite of its great age."

"It has been in our family for five generations," Miss Jean said, flushing. "It belonged originally to the Graemes of Claverhouse, from whom our grandfather was descended." A vein of pride ran through the modest little woman, so conscious of her few claims to notice. She cherished every ancient heirloom without regard to its intrinsic value, feeling that in these signs of past greatness lay her weapon against all who sneered at plain, unpretending Jean Graham.

"Ah! you are the descendant of Bonny Dundee, the bravest hero of his century." Lota's voice had a faint ring of surprise in it. The leader of Killiecrankie had been one of her dream-lovers—so she had married one of

his kin when she rebelled against the bitter irony of her fate! The ghastly humour of it came upon her as she listened to Miss Jean's stories of the past. She contrasted George, robust, strong and doubtless courageous but devoid of romance and charm, with the gallant bearing of handsome, all-conquering Dundee.

"These things are all yours now," Miss Jean said. "They are not very grand, but they are useful and will wear for a long time. You can put them into the background when you get the new furniture. We have lived very plainly, but you have been accustomed to a different style."

Lota winced at the meek acknowledgement of her claims. If they had resented her presence she should have been able to fall back on pride as an ally, but neither displayed unwillingness to leave the field to her. Kate, in truth, was anxious to marry her suitor while his wooing was still ardent, although she knew that he had not intended so speedy a termination to it, when, in slanderous parlance, "she had snapped him up" six months ago. She expected a handsome cheque from George, the member of the family who represented Capital, and thought it wise to keep on good terms with his bride in view of future favours.

"I have a few things in my boxes," Lota said hurriedly. "I must show you them some day. We were always travelling about and seldom had a settled home, but there are the trophies father left to each of us. My share of the spoil was a modest one—a sword

and a dagger or two, some embroidery and the miniatures."

"Show me your cream dress," Kate said, hardly listening to the last words. She was not interested in family relics but she had an insatiable love of finery and appraised it with unerring scrutiny, if it emanated from local emporiums.

Lota sighed. She did not want to expose the precious remembrances of childhood to Kate Graham's hard eyes, yet she would have been glad to bring forward the few pitiful remains of what had been her home. She took Kate up to her room, however, and brought forth the different articles of her wardrobe, one by one. Hats and boots and gowns and trinkets—everything was a source of curiosity and interest. Kate's shallow blue eyes lit up as they fell greedily on French fripperies and dainty toilet accessories. She had been bound by a narrow allowance all her life; she had always been proud of her scraping economy. Lota seemed to have few old garments and none that called for judicious concealment beneath a smarter article of attire. All her appointments were neat and plentiful—she had been brought up to consider as necessary such elegant additions as Kate deemed a splendid luxury. She was quite ready to spare a blouse or two and a few ribbons and gloves, when Kate broached the question. She watched the elder woman try her favourite hats on with a pang, however. She had not been accustomed to such friendly liberties. The simple hats looked ridiculous above Kate's elaborate, fringed coiffure—all their taste was destroyed

or nullified. It was well that Miss Graham decided they were of different orders of beauty or she might have been confronted by her own headgear many times in the streets of Ballymore. There was an unscrupulous hardihood about Kate that she was powerless to oppose.

CHAPTER VII

THE cream dress was perhaps a powerful factor in the success which attended Lota's reception at Ballymore. "So distinguished! So really smart! Extremely unlike her husband's family! Quite an acquisition to Ballymore." The tide of public opinion flowing out of the tiny hall of the Octagon House passed up Malone Street and penetrated to hotel-bars and whisky-shops, even to more humble gatherings in peat-scented cottages, where the liveliest interest was taken in social events.

The first to arrive was little Mrs Murray, the chemist's wife, blonde, doll-like, and dressed in the height of Ballymore fashion. She approved of Lota's appearance and hoped that they would be great friends as their husbands were—a statement of the utmost audacity to the mind of Kate, who observed distinctions in the social scale with rigorous exactness and graded the worthy chemist several steps lower than the least successful medical practitioner. Lota did not feel any particular affinity with Mrs Murray's rather metallic personality but she was predetermined to play the part of hostess graciously. So she tried to smooth over Kate's contemptuous speeches and draw Jean from her silent post of observation. It was not an easy task and she was glad to welcome a batch of visitors, who demanded less individual attention. A mother and two daughters followed a tall,

awkward girl announced by Biddy, after a protracted colloquy in the hall, as Miss Molly M'Bride.

"What is she like? How do you get on with a new boss?"

Lota could not help hearing the remarks of naïve curiosity, which preceded her guest. She turned to the new-comer, hoping for some diversion to bridge over an awful silence during which the family of Gillespie devoured scones. Her wrist was wrenched to snapping point by a vigorous clasp of Mrs M'Bride's hand and two blue eyes looked down into hers with something of bewilderment.

"How d'ye do? Had any golf yet?" Miss M'Bride seated herself on a small chair, that creaked ominously beneath her weight. She then distributed a shower of friendly nods to the rest of the company—Lota noticed that they avoided her hand-clasp with one accord—and crossed her legs so as to bring rather prominently into view a pair of heavy tan boots, soled with regard to utility.

"No, thanks. Don't drink tea. I'm in training," she observed briefly, when Miss Jean offered her refreshment. The spinster fell back into her corner and began to talk nervously to Mrs Gillespie, who lowered her voice to import certain scandalous rumours to the one woman in Ballymore, who was held above suspicion.

Molly M'Bride's gaze wandered round the room and returned to Lota's figure with a certain wistfulness. She felt conscious that her clothes were not suitable for the occasion, though she had never hitherto troubled

to change them for the purpose of calling on her friends. The thick woollen jersey was soiled and faded, the short skirt bound with leather and reaching only a few inches below the knee, was in need of many stitches; her gloves had a button missing and a great rent at the seams of either hand.

"Awf'lly muddy our hockey field is," she said in half-apology. "It was quite a foot deep in water to-day in the middle, a reg'lar quagmire. Talk about bogs—if you've come to Ireland in the hope of seeing one, let me take you up to the Cairn. Would you look at this?"

She held up a boot so clogged with soil that Miss Jean had been in an agony since it first trod her carpet. Molly had a sturdy contempt for carpets and a comprehensive disregard for household troubles. On the subject of the M'Bride ménage every matron of the neighbourhood waxed eloquent and some few humorous. Only Molly and her seven brothers and sisters could ignore the scandal arising from a perpetual picnic instead of regular meals and a total lack of cleaning and polishing even when company was expected. "Typically Irish and delightfully hospitable," English visitors would say when driven out to the ramshackle farmhouse to glean copy for numberless letters and journals.

Lota laughed and shook her head. "I wonder you ever got your boot away from the field," she said.

"Sure *I'm* not a stick in the mud," Miss M'Bride retorted, not without a meaning glance at the rest of the company. "Bob always pulls me out but it is bad for my stick." She surveyed that formidable weapon

anxiously. "Isn't it a beauty? A real Pickering, you know. D'ye play back or forward?"

"I don't play at all."

"Don't play hockey!" Miss M'Bride's tone was shrill. Her excitement found vent in a flourish of her stick, that knocked over two bric-à-brac tables and a milking-stool and threatened to annihilate a mild-eyed lady, who entered at that moment.

"Beg pardon," she muttered hastily, and turned to Lota with renewed astonishment. "I say, you really must come to practice. We're awfully short of players this season and the secretary is arranging some good matches. You golf, of course."

Lota disclaimed all knowledge of athletic pursuits, feeling that she for ever lost the friendship of a congenial spirit by her confession.

Miss M'Bride's high-coloured face paled perceptibly.

"Well, you might come and try," she urged. "That stupid Mrs Holmes has another baby, so she can't play for a month or two. We had to turn up a man short last week because she wasn't there." A note of injury carried the remark across the room to where Mrs Gillespie still murmured softly of her acquaintance's transgressions, to where the Misses Gillespie discussed a friend's trousseau with Miss Kate, their detestation. They gazed, as one woman, at Molly's untidy hair, hanging in wisps about her forehead below the red tam o'shanter she had worn to their knowledge four years at least, they scanned relentlessly her ungainly form and boyish pose.

Lota saw a defiant expression in the girl's honest eyes and tried to lead the conversation into safer paths; but her guest had sacrificed sufficiently to the proprieties. She had been bitterly disappointed in Mrs Graham, and she was now resolved to trudge home along the dark road that led by circuitous ways to the next village. She departed rather noisily, leaving an accumulation of muddy turf on the floor and a brisk critique of her manners and morals in full swing on the sofa.

Lota found herself in the midst of a little knot of callers, whose names she failed to disentangle from a chaotic list, presented verbally by Biddy. A swarthy, ill-favoured woman stood in front of her, both hands held out helplessly. She was dressed in odd, brightly coloured garments that savoured of a bygone age, yet hinted at the hygienic, modern faddist. She was indescribably loose, voluminous, badly put together. Her sallow face was encircled by tufts of short dark hair growing low on the forehead, her eyes had a dog-like fidelity of expression. Inducted in a chair, she sat in an attitude of crouching discomfort. Her voice had a peculiar nasal twang with a slight foreign intonation.

"Someone told me you played Chopin," she began without preamble. "I want you to play to me sometimes. I play a little myself on the violin. I've hardly heard a note of music for two years, not since we left Milan."

There was an appeal in her egoism that touched Lota while it amused the other ladies. Madeline Escott was a warning to many youthful aspirants against over-

weening ambition. She had wasted time, money and health on the pursuit of a hobby, which would never bring her fame, for she had broken down at the grand concert in London which was to mark her triumphant début as a violinist. Of what use would be the famous masters and the lengthy foreign visits to conservatoires? She would never play at local entertainments; she shut herself up to practise or went to the houses of obscure friends.

The odd face attracted Lota by its power, while it repelled by its utter absence of physical beauty.

"Who told you I played Chopin?" she asked. She detected an undercurrent of irony beneath Miss Escott's humility. "Surely every one plays Chopin."

"Ah, yes! But not divinely, not with soul. I feel sure you play with soul. Let me see your hands." Madeline waddled up to her and seized her wrists. "You've practised hard but you're getting flabby," she cried reproachfully. "You've had good lessons—flexibility, muscle, suppleness. Who was your master? Hermann of Leipzig? You must come and play Brahms with me, and Bach." Her voice rose in entreaty and again her hands fell into the grotesque, supplicatory attitude that had aroused Lota's amazement. Miss Escott really believed in this new friend—she was in a flutter of delight that someone was come to Ballymore, who might appreciate Madeline Escott's Strad. She began to talk about her own instrument and only Lota cared to listen, for the Rev. William O'Hara was wandering disconsolately over the débris with hungry eyes,

uttering meanwhile sallies of such delicious humour that the room was convulsed with mirth.

Madeline talked in an eager strain of music and books and art. She had lived at Rome, at Milan, at Paris, and with a congenial spirit had a remarkable felicity of expression and description. She discovered a mutual acquaintance in an old German maestro, whom Lota had known and feared. It was good to dilate, to someone who understood, on the glories of the divine instrument. The plain face and ungainly gestures seemed to drop away from the inner shrine of genius—her voice lost its unpleasant cadences and became deep with feeling. There were tears in Madeline's eyes when she rose to go in response to a warning sign from a younger sister, who was ashamed of her eccentric absorption. Annette Escott paid small tribute to the talent that had failed to win applause; she looked on Madeline's passionate love for music as a craze that rendered her contemptible. Vain, trivial, and of a hard heart, she only tolerated her half-sister's humours when she wanted to obtain money for the gratification of her own pleasures, for the two women shared a modest fortune that belonged by right to the elder only.

"How stupid you were, Maddy," Annette began as the door closed behind them. "You always run your hobby and take no notice of anybody else. Mrs Graham ought to have been talking to Mrs Dunbar instead of listening to your rubbish. She won't get into much society at Ballymore if the Bank people are offended."

Lota had, indeed, suffered a fall in the estimation of

several worthy matrons by her evident interest in a woman, who was only patronised because she was the daughter of a former rector of the parish and had an independent income of her own. She had been momentarily forgetful of her duties as hostess and the due precedence to be observed in her attitude to guests. Mrs Dunbar was stout and of a benevolent aspect, rather belied by her sharp tongue. She held the first position at most gatherings by dint of an undaunted confidence in her own powers and a stirring energy that pushed the more lethargic to the wall. She made Lota feel a mere child as she proceeded to put her through a rigorous cross-examination as to her past, present, and future.

"I gather that you are musical. We shall hope to enrol you as a member of the Concert Society. We are raising a fund in aid of First Ballymore. Dr Graham is a staunch Presbyterian, so you will attend our church. We have an excellent minister in Mr Macrae and we are rather proud of our choir. My husband is the choirmaster and Sunday-school superintendent. There is a great deal of work for willing hands. I have no patience with people who say that Ballymore is dull." Mrs Dunbar cast a rebuking glance at a group of girls with heads close together and tongues wagging briskly. Her own two daughters were brought up to follow in her footsteps, and what little spare time they had was spent in needlework of a useful nature and wood-carving, which filled the stalls of bazaars for miles around.

"Young unmarried people seldom realise their

responsibilities. The matron's thin lips closed tightly, betraying certain lines of avarice about the mouth. "*You* will have plenty to occupy yourself with in a doctor's household. We are near neighbours, so don't hesitate to step over when you want help or advice."

Lota thanked the good lady, but inwardly prayed that the day might not dawn when she must call on Mrs Dunbar to assist in a household crisis.

Biddy entered with some ceremony as Mrs Dunbar rose and announced one Mrs Hamilton with bated breath. It was not a usual occurrence for the rector's wife to call on the ladies of the Octagon House, there being a rigid line of demarcation between Presbyterian and Episcopalian at Ballymore.

Mrs Hamilton had a broad, homely countenance and a sensible expression, that reflected itself from her shoes and bonnet. She was an amiable woman but of an apathetic nature and sympathy had been denied her together with the kindred gift of charity.

"There is practically *no* society at Ballymore," she observed, with her utterance impeded by a buttered crumpet. "It seemed a wilderness to me after Leamington, where our last parish was. The people are ignorant and prejudiced and the Orange party has a strong following. I miss the garden-parties and the pleasant visits of the neighbouring clergy *intensely*. However, I don't suppose *you* will feel this so much."

She had heard that Lota was a governess and had a satisfactory consciousness of duty nobly performed as a rector's wife, when she put on her second-best bonnet

and left her own comfortable fireside to recognise the family physician's bride.

"I am sure Dr Graham will be a good husband," she purred on; "he has always been so kind to his sisters. I must make up a little party for supper some night and ask you both. You will perhaps like to join our Clothing Charity—we meet every Thursday, and each lady contributes flannel and a pair of boots."

Lota's cheeks had flushed with mingled feelings of annoyance and amusement when Mrs Hamilton finished her fourth cup of tea and took leave. George eyed her with admiration when he returned from his round, and found her among the empty chairs and littered tables.

"Tired of talk, eh?" he queried. "Well, I'm ready for some tea myself." Miss Jean hurried off to superintend the meal and Kate, having walked home with two of her cronies, the bride and bridegroom were left alone.

Lota had a sudden fear of possible caresses, as she felt the radiant affection of the doctor's smile. She began to run over the list of guests with an ardent wish to escape from tête-à-tête. Could she always manage to maintain the attitude of bon camaraderie, which she had recognised as the only possible condition between them? A sick realisation of dependence stole upon her unawares in the perilous intimacy of solitude.

"So Mother Hamilton looked you up, did she?" George asked with a furtive survey of his own face in the mirror, which reflected Lota. "Well, I don't mind if

you do go to St Pat's sometimes, though Macrae would be wild to see *me* turn Episcopalian."

Lota hardly realised the intricate strife of rival parties or she might have thanked her husband less carelessly for freedom of religious opinion. George did not strike her as an ardent theologian—there was much too sporting a cut about his clothes and his conversation seldom glanced at the spiritual.

CHAPTER VIII

THE round of household duties at the Octagon House was a daily perplexity to Lota in the first novelty of her position as châtelaine. She had been accustomed to the rather indolent methods of an Indian-bred mother, who preferred to inhabit a flat and laugh over its inconveniences rather than to undertake the responsibilities of a larger ménage, and, later, she had hardly noticed the niceties of dusting, cooking and cleaning such as were performed by Madame Bonnier's many *domestiques* with silent precision. She had scant idea of money and quantity, but a level head kept her fortunately from grosser blunders and her natural grasp of power prevented her from being imposed upon by the Ulster tradesman, ever ready as he is to take advantage of the Englisher.

Lota enjoyed the shopping and that part of the day's work which involved outdoor exercise, but she disliked extremely the odds and ends of wifely tasks that sometimes spoilt a fine ride or a pleasant excursion to the glens; and most of all she hated the ceaseless round of calls entailed by her position as the doctor's lady. She had discovered the secret of success in professional occupations rests very largely with the womenfolk, who snub or patronise, smile or frown, and, according to their procedure, add to their money-earner's receipts or cruelly subtract from them.

George was nervously anxious that his bride should

call even upon those families, who made no pretence to society, for a few such independent clans did exist in Ballymore, holding themselves coldly aloof from all festivities and refusing to follow the fashion of tea-giving, by which means they put a substantial sum of money in the bank quarterly, and consequently had their reward for much sacrifice of place and honour.

Lota preferred this honest, grasping sect to the more pretentious class, who clung to her skirts in order to rise to a slightly higher sphere. The tiny social orbit was for long a mystery to her, and the pains her friends took to initiate her into its dark secrets a still greater source of astonishment. What could it matter if she asked jolly, good-natured little Jeanie Millar to partake of tea with her and then refused the invitation of Mrs Ross, extended with the utmost condescension? Of course she might have put Jeanie off, but that would have been unnecessary discourtesy and the Rosses had never done more than leave cards on her once, great square pieces of pasteboard raised to the surface regularly by Kate, when she paid her sister-in-law a visit.

It was Kate, who sternly interrogated her on the friends she made, the clothes she wore, the shops from which she purchased goods; it was Kate who impressed her with the enormity of neglecting George's few wealthy patients in favour of the really suffering cases, occasionally brought under her notice. Kate was prodigal of advice—it was the only thing she dispensed freely. She had a kind of superiority over Lota, she imagined due to her long standing as mistress of the ceremonies at the

Octagon House. She also feared to see that position she had won by such infinite toil—a position nearly as high as the magnates of the neighbourhood and very, very far removed from the " business people," sink into a mere shadow of its former state. She suspected Lota constantly of extravagance, though she never came to Featherstone Place, without making considerable inroads on the contents of the larder. Biddy used to shake her fist and mutter objurgations, but " Miss Kate beat everything for greed—she'd rob her own father if he wasn't of the same griping stock." Biddy sought to defend her young mistress's possessions with spirit, and did once or twice score a decided triumph over her former employer by substituting an inferior cheese when she was expected to dinner or curtailing the amount of dessert unwarrantably, so that her foe should not gather up many fragments remaining over.

Lota was far from grudging of her best to either of the women she had, in some measure, supplanted ; she often went to the hospital to take a handsome present for Jean, and she usually invited Kate to accompany her to the neighbouring town at her expense. Still, she looked at Kate expecting a blush to tinge the mottled red skin when the bank-clerk's wife met the manager's good spouse on her doorstep, and had to put down a heavy basket of provisions before she could shake hands. She looked in vain. Kate uttered a few remarks on the weather and shouldered her spoil again calmly, betraying not the smallest embarrassment to be found in something like the condition of a mendicant. She had no shame,

in fact. Her upbringing had been of the narrowest school, all lavishness held up as sin, all grasping economy praised as careful management. George's education, indeed, had been costly and he had always been encouraged to spend money, that befitted his future style of living, but that was the usual distribution of family gear in Ballymore, an ancient, unjust partitioning of money, such as holds now and then to the present day in remote country districts, where the men of a household keep hunters and hounds, drive, shoot, and game with almost lordly ostentation, while their sisters scrub and slave, like the dependents they are taught to consider themselves. Kate Graham's history had not been without a hint of tragedy. She had been very handsome in her first youth before her features hardened into coarseness, and one of George's college friends had wooed her during a vacation spent at the Octagon House. He was a young Englishman of some breeding, an amiable if weak character, fond of study and a hard worker. Kate was betrothed to him for six months and then received a briefly worded intimation that the relationship must cease since the family of her lover did not consent to the match, distrusting both her nationality and her youth. The real reason, as Kate conjectured bitterly, was that they shrank from her lack of education and culture, which had been betrayed in letters and speech. She bore the disappointment well, but from that time the love of money seized her, tightening the lines of her mouth, narrowing her eyes into keen slits of avarice. If she had small knowledge and smaller breeding, she

would win her place through wealth. That could buy respect and deference enough in Antrim, though the people "on the other side of the water" despised its glitter.

Kate managed to save out of the least liberal allowance; she amassed quite large totals in her savings book, and induced hard-headed men to put them out at interest for her in safe investments. She was fond of boasting about her savings, though she pleaded poverty successfully to her relations. George had increased her yearly stipend when the old father died, and had brought Jean back from the hospital, where she had trained in the hopes of earning independence. He had always meant to make up to his sisters for their stunted girlhood and they certainly were better clothed than Ballymore had ever seen them during the years that succeeded George's last exam. But what he could not atone for was their deficiencies in learning and accomplishments. He felt the humility of it sometimes after visiting houses, where the ladies sang and played and talked easily on other topics than the price of butter and the iniquities of serving-maids. Lota's complete unlikeness had attracted him though he was too loyal to be ashamed of his own kin.

Mrs Patrick Kelly was an early riser. She had breakfasted and set her rooms in order by 9 A.M. daily and was scandalised to find Lota still lingering over her coffee when she called in at that unseasonable hour.

"What! Still eating!" she asked sharply. "You

do dawdle about. It's time you were thinking of dinner. What are you going to have ? "

" I don't know," Lota responded carelessly. " We don't dine till seven. It isn't time to worry just yet. Have you seen the News-Letter ? "

Kate was not to be put off so easily. Her searching vision was passing over every object in the room from the paint on the door, to the curtains at the window.

" You've bought a new coffee-pot ! " she exclaimed, bearing down on the table to examine the contents. " How much did you give for it ? The old wasn't worn out."

" It leaked." Lota ignored the first question purposely. Sooner or later Kate would worm the truth out of her, but she was disinclined for cross-examination that morning. She had, indeed, allowed herself to oversleep and so had found her husband gone out when she descended to breakfast, a fact that caused her conscience to prick in an uncomfortable way. She liked to think that she studied her husband's pleasure and convenience above her own. It was one of the ways in which she proposed to pay off the debt she owed him. The debt hung heavily over her on certain occasions—it was seldom out of her thoughts. She had a strong sense of duty and an independent spirit withal that chafed under an unfair bargain.

" You've done your hair very badly this morning," Kate pursued, sitting down at the table and pouring out a cup of coffee for herself. " You should use a frame for the front and curl all the loose ends. That plait

arrangement is quite out-of-date. Don't you take *Home Hints*?"

"No, we can't afford it," Lota replied, nettled by the free comments on her appearance. "We take *The Spectator*, and *The Pink 'Un*, and *Chambers' Journal*, and *The Lancet*, and——"

"Oh, do stop!" Kate interrupted unceremoniously. "You never try to save. I'm sure *Home Hints* would make a lot of difference in your housekeeping bills. I'll take some of the bacon and a kidney. It's no use sending it out into the kitchen for those girls to eat."

Lota complied, recognising with a sigh that her sister-in-law meant to stay for some hours. She had intended to practise and write letters but her plans must be set aside.

Kate picked up an opened envelope and examined the post-mark coolly. "You do get a lot of letters," she said, curiosity rising fast. "Who lives in New York?"

"My sister and brother-in-law among others," Lota said absently. She had received a long missive from Frances, full of anxiety as to her new life. It would be very difficult to answer that letter truthfully and satisfy Frances' solicitude. "We can't understand why you were married in Paris," the burden ran. "Surely, you could have waited till some of us were able to receive you. Dr Graham must have thought it very odd that none of your relatives should trouble to come. Morpeth would have liked to make some inquiries too—one cannot pretend to take any one on trust in such a very vital matter. But you seem to be quite happily circum-

stanced, and it is lucky that his sisters are so nice and friendly. Otherwise, you must have felt wretched at going amongst total strangers in Ireland."

Poor Frances! She always thought so much of birth and manner. Kate would have given a fatal blow to her pride had she been compelled to admit her into the close bonds of sisterhood. George, too, would have "grated." That was a favourite word of Frances'. Morpeth was almost the only man she had ever admitted to be quite unimpeachably refined. Lota smiled as she imagined the two husbands together: George, big, burly, unpolished, jocose, and Morpeth by his side, the embodiment of masculine elegance and scholarly urbanity.

Frances had been moved to sisterly warmth at the close. "If you feel for your husband half of what I have in my heart for mine you are very happy now. There is nothing like the first months of married life when that life begins, as it should, as yours and mine have, with true love."

"You seem to have plenty of time for correspondence," Kate observed as Lota laid down one of the closely-written sheets. "Has your sister sent a present to you?"

"She sends a cheque," Lota said, handing it to Kate in obedience to the latter's unspoken request.

"Ten pounds. Well, it's not so bad; but she's rich, isn't she?"

"Not at all. They have very little except Morpeth's salary and they have a great many expenses on account

of his delicate health." The cheque represented great self-denial on Frances' part, she knew.

"She must have a lot of pretence about her, then." Kate was disappointed that she might not dilate on the magnificence of her new relatives to her gossips. Lota would never brag about anything but that was no reason why she should not shine by the reflected glory.

"Frances doesn't know what pretence means in your sense," Lota found herself suddenly antagonistic to the harsh-voiced, ill-natured woman, who preyed upon her only to malign her.

"She is dressed up in a fine style in that photograph of yours with her arms and neck naked." To Mrs Kelly such a form of evening attire betokened either riches or an aping of them akin to fraud. She rarely donned anything more elaborate than a cheap silk blouse and thin skirt for the most gorgeous festivities of Ballymore.

"Frances looks well at a small expenditure," Lota said, "she has a very beautiful throat and arms and Morpeth likes to see her in a low frock every evening for dinner."

Kate sniffed. She thought that it was hardly decent for a man to confess such a weakness and immodest of his wife to pander to it.

"You imitate her, I suppose," she said. The kidney had caused her to be slightly bilious, and she liked to taunt her sister-in-law on aspirations because she was conscious of her own.

"In the evening dress? I never wear it at home since George doesn't."

"No. In the late dinner and all that."

Lota laughed, unable to suppress her amusement at Kate's unsophisticated notions of grandeur.

"We have dinner at seven because it's more convenient for both of us. A doctor who has a long country round can't possibly return by one every day, and a man likes a meal after he's finished his work."

Kate's temper was rising. "You study men to some purpose," she said at random, not realising her own meaning, but vaguely conscious of a desire to strike at Lota. The dainty appointments of the table, the fresh furniture and the generally changed aspect of the old familiar room had bitten her with the conviction that Lota looked down on her.

Lota folded her table-napkin and rose.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go and see Biddy about lunch." She did not intend to pursue the conversation since it tended to disagreeable lapses into *double entendre*.

"I'll come and speak to her," Kate said briskly. "She used to be my servant, you know."

Biddy, at least, had not forgotten that fact. She gloried in her freedom from a miserly bondage; which had held her youth in check and meted out the lowest possible rations. She grimaced behind Kate's back when that inquiring housewife opened the oven and examined the contents of every saucepan.

"You've far too big a fire," she said peremptorily. "Take some coals off, Biddy, and keep it down."

The maid, however, disdained to hear the mandate

and pursued a conversation with her mistress on the subject of groceries, as if unconscious of another presence.

"There's plenty for you and the master," she said cheerfully, "and don't be getting in any more of that ham. We can have eggs the mornin' and the bacon 'll do for us for a while. A wee bit of mate for lunch and a tart, you'll be having."

Kate had a weakness for ham and was unable to afford it when it was to be obtained without payment. She insisted on seeing the piece and opined that it would be hardly enough for lunch, a statement that produced intense disgust in the mind of Biddy.

"Sure and what did she get married for when she lives here and eats us up nearly every day in the week?"

Lota heard the complaint ascend to the bedroom, where she had sought a temporary refuge. If she dared describe Kate's invasions, how amused but oh, how heart-broken would Frances be!

Would Frances have endured all this busy interference in her concerns? She was cold and proud enough to rebuff even Kate, perhaps. Lota wished for a moment that her own nature were of the kind to refuse generosity so misplaced. She had to secure her drawers so that they could not be opened, she hastily thrust certain photographs out of sight. Kate would soon be upon her, demanding to see her new purchases down to her last pair of gloves. She would have to look out a present of some kind or rumours of fearful import would be spread in Ballymore of her selfish ingratitude and her unparalleled greed. It was rather like the buying off

of the Danes and she felt herself as weak as Ethelred. Many of her friends, notably Mrs Murray, had warned her against Kate's depredations. Everyone knew of her propensities. She begged and borrowed unscrupulously from the merest acquaintances. Lota would have gladly shared with the culprit all she had, if she could have prevented these extraneous encroachments. She blushed when they were recounted as if she had been in fault.

"You mustn't put up with it," Mrs Murray urged. "Be firm at the first, my dear. She has plenty of money for all her wants, and George was generosity itself on her marriage. I believe that is why she accepted that poor, half-starved looking Pat Kelly. You mustn't rob your own household to give to her."

But with these warnings in her ears Lota hunted out a new veil and a handsome lace collar, and considered what else she could well spare from her by no means well-stocked wardrobe.

CHAPTER IX

A FIERCE galloping of hoofs sounded along the steep hill road, that led to the village of Drumsheagh. The ring of iron beat sharply clear in the deep spring silence, marking the impetuous course of an animal, unloosed from control. Then, with a shock of life and movement two figures sprang into the calm pastoral scene, spreading green and fragrant beneath an April sky.

A woman leaned idly over a white, many-barred gate with a frown of petulance at the interruption to her thoughts. The long dream that had absorbed her was rudely broken. She sighed and turned wearily to the struggle between horse and rider.

Down the fir-crowned hill, that rose like a precipice above the water, plunged a spirited black mare, and now amidst the whirling dust a slight figure was discernible, straining at the reins in an attitude of dauntless composure. Fire blazed in the great dark eyes, a smile played rather grimly about the full, firm lips. Thoughts of her own danger were not in Lota's mind, though she reached the bottom of the hill with a jarring shock that scattered far and wide the loose stones of the mountain-road and shook down masses of chestnut hair from beneath her hard felt hat. She was experiencing defeat and the fierce pricking of conscience, for she was probably about to destroy her husband's most valuable

horse. There was a stone wall ahead and Chloe would dash straight into it, unless a miracle intervened.

The white gate opened as she flashed past and the bridle received a violent jerk, that enabled Lota to get a new grip of the reins. Chloe's headlong course was checked and she was well in hand before the wall was reached. Lota sprang off when the struggling animal could be brought to a standstill and walked back along the road. She saw now that she owed her life to the unknown hand, that had been so cleverly ready to avert a catastrophe.

The woman, who had been rudely disturbed by her own impetuous action, stood by the gate again, trying to take up the threads of her thought. She was repeating some verse with a lilting refrain to which she beat time with one hand.

"Let me thank you a thousand times." Lota was conscious that she disturbed an absorbing train of thought as she uttered the words and saw a frown of petulant annoyance. "I am afraid you have strained your arm," she added desperately.

Her succourer laughed. "It is not hurt, but you disturbed me a little, I confess. How tired your rampant conqueror ought to be!" Something of the same unbroken spirit flashed into the eyes, which met Lota's in easy scrutiny.

"Yes. She did conquer me. I ought not to have brought her out, but my own animal was lame and I must ride on such a day. If you had been a whit less prompt, I should have paid rather heavily for my

folly. Chloe would not have seen her stable again nor I my home." There was a dreary echo in the last words that the other woman did not fail to observe.

"So this is Chloe." The delicate hand patted the glossy neck caressingly.

"Yes, this is Chloe, and I am her mistress, Lota Graham." It was said as if in answer to a question that had not been spoken.

"And I am Damaris Newall. You must come to my house and rest before you mount your horse again. It is not far, just a few yards above the road."

Damaris Newall led the way and Lota followed, her arm through Chloe's bridle. The horse was quivering in every limb but quite subdued by fatigue. She put her nose into the stranger's hand and suffered pats and soft words with unwonted docility.

Damaris broke now and then into the refrain—

> "Ce sont les cadets de Gascogne
> De Carbon de Castel-Jaloux,
> Bretteurs et menteurs sans vergogne,
> Ce sont les cadets de Gascogne!"

It was impossible to make conventional conversation. The words beat themselves into Lota's brain as characteristic of the personality beside her. She followed silently, eager to learn more of Damaris Newall.

She was a slight woman with an air of ephemeral delicacy, fair, pale, exquisitely dressed. A shadow of past suffering lurked about her tightly-closed lips and on her contracted brows. The artificiality of the highest culture combated with a native sturdiness of character—

she was dressed with regard to fashion in detail but the design was original, the colours peculiarly daring. A soft dark shade of green, mingling with palest hyacinth, enhanced the exquisite fairness of skin that was Damaris Newall's one claim to youth. Her features were small and irregular, her head drooped on a long, curved neck. The eyes beneath dark, thick eyebrows had the drawing power, which penetrates but seldom reveals. An inscrutable mystery lay in the shifting expression. Now deep melancholy brooded in their depths, suggesting tragedy and bitterness of soul, now they hardened into keen observation, now humour danced to the surface and lit up the face to beauty. The shell-like ears, the small arched feet, the fragile hands made Lota feel coarse and rude of build. She moved beside Damaris Newall, conscious of superior strength and a desire to protect, yet she doubted her power to have arrested Chloe's flight, as that thin white wrist had done.

The house was a humble cottage at first sight, low-roofed and embowered in trees; but passing through the wooden porch they reached a spacious hall, where a great fire burned. A huge mastiff rose and leapt towards Damaris joyously. She bent down and kissed his ugly muzzle. He licked her face and fawned at her feet.

"Come into the drawing-room." The mistress remembered her guest at last. "We will have tea together and look at the finest view in County Antrim."

A plump, comfortable woman of forty-five advanced to meet them as they entered. She gave a scream as she caught sight of Damaris.

"What *have* you done? I knew you would wander off and come to some harm to-day. It is always the same when you are singing that odious French song."

"Mrs Graham, Mrs Winter," Damaris' voice rang imperiously. "This lady has had a struggle with her horse and is dying for woman's usual panacea."

Mrs Winter accepted the explanation in silence. She murmured an excuse and left the room in answer to a look from Damaris. It was her business to take a surprise without comment, and visitors were so rare at The Homestead that she welcomed them in any guise. If she tempted this girl with her daintiest fare, she might come again perhaps. Few guests had returned after their first visit—their hostess had been too frankly bored by their provincial dulness.

"You think I'm mad and that Isa Winter is my keeper," Miss Newall began with a smile. "People generally arrive at that conclusion, I believe. Have no fear—I am comparatively harmless, and you were bidden to the feast."

The room was a revelation to Lota of its owner's aloofness from her kind. There were few ornaments, such as women love, and on the painted walls hung pictures, that the general eye would condemn as barbaric in their subjects. A man wrestling with a lion in horrible desperation, while all around a gay throng of spectators chatted and gamed and feasted in oblivion of the grim struggle. The artist had a fidelity of touch that brought out the symbolism defiantly. An eastern scene hung by the side of this picture—a wonderful mass of soft,

undefined, sensuous imagery, and on another wall hung three etchings of a little-known Japanese artist.

The furniture was of a heterogeneous description, some quaint and simple in design and the rest modern and luxurious. Books were closely packed on low shelves that ran round three sides of the room and several lay on a huge divan fitted with eastern appurtenances.

"William Morris, a hareem, Blake, Rembrandt, practical socialism and severe elegance," Miss Newall remarked with a wave of the hand. She lay back on her divan in a careless attitude and puffed at a perfumed cigarette. "So out of place in an Antrim farmhouse, isn't it?" she continued; "but you can look at the mountains and shut your eyes to the Japanese painting. I haven't any photos to show you. Do you care for books?"

Lota examined the volumes on the divan, feeling confused and unable to maintain her self-possession.

"One ought not to read Thackeray here. Miss Edgeworth or Katherine Tynan would be more in keeping." The worn green book was recovered from Lota's hands and tossed on to an adjacent table.

"Ah, here comes tea. You will forgive me all when you have tasted Isa's scones."

An embroidery-frame stood near the divan and Damaris rose and swayed towards it. She plied the many-hued web diligently, while Mrs Winter made tea and chatted of the difficulties of house-keeping. The conversation became interesting when the hostess joined them, having wearied of her needle. Lota listened spell-bound to the

slow, musical voice that rose and fell in mockery or earnestness. Stories of travel and adventure in wild lands, anecdotes of a life of varied interest, criticism and raillery and strong review of matters social and political—she felt as if her marriage had been a dream and she was once more among the lettered and the free. The time passed by her unheeding and the soft spring darkness fell over the room, casting into relief a glittering rapier that hung opposite the setting sun. When a maid came with lamps, she rose hurriedly. A vision of George seemed to spring into being, George in his tight hunting breeches and covert coat, with the aroma of tobacco and the loud speech that marked his presence.

"Must you go?" Miss Newall asked with wistful regret. "It has been delightful to have you. I cannot let you go unless you promise to come again. We poor forlorn women stand badly in need of a change from our own evil humours sometimes. See, I will lend you the book you wanted and you shall bring it me back. It is a pledge."

She put the book into Lota's hands and came with her into the porch. Chloe was standing by the gate in charge of a stout Irishman, who grinned a delighted recognition.

"That's Pat, our man," Miss Newall explained. "He's a gardener, but we don't cultivate the garden. I hate country pursuits. We keep Pat because he really is Irish, and we like to remind ourselves sometimes that this is Ireland. For that same reason, we burn peat."

"They will be anxious about me, I am afraid." Lota remembered that George would be at home and perhaps Kate, who, married recently to her youthful husband, spent many evenings at Featherstone Place to further the economy of her own establishment. A shrinking from her sordid surroundings came upon Lota as she bade farewell. She called them sordid for the first time, remembering with disgust the narrow streets of Ballymore, crowded with farmers and rough countrymen, reeking with the mingled odours of market and whisky-shop. She must go quickly. George would be pacing up and down, jingling the loose coins in his pockets and impatient to tell her the latest racing news and Alan Crawford's wittiest sally up-to-date.

The sweetbriar in the garden hedge seemed to hold her and the heavy fragrance of the lilacs. The spring had come unexpectedly so that the birds still chirped with glee at its advent. Chloe was restive too, and her mistress mounted with difficulty but the reins were firmly held at last.

"Good-bye." Lota turned in her saddle to catch a last glimpse of the figure at the gate. She clattered off down the long road, passing only a few humble dwellings with stretches of waste land between them.

As the spring mist fell round her, a sense of loneliness came with it, born of the yearning sounds of nature—the cry of lambs in the field, the twittering of birds, the sap of grass and leaf. The longing of the blood was at her heart, numbed hitherto by an unrelaxed vigilance. The sweetness of mating-time called to her, the glamour of

love that begins with trembling emotion. Desires long stifled turned her faint with apprehension. A man sat under a hedge with a colleen by his side, glancing shyly at Lota from beneath her cloak. More than one pair of lovers passed, happy in young love and the dawn of a new season.

The reins slackened and Chloe started through the air at a mad gallop. Lota pulled with all her might to avoid a collision with a car approaching at a reckless speed. A white-haired gentleman waved a salutation as she passed and his companion turned towards her so that his face gazed for a moment full in hers. A haunting recollection passed into Lota's mind. She tried in vain to remember where she had seen the face before. The air had become delicately oppressive, the piercing bird-notes rang with poetry. Lota rode gallantly, conscious that a keen gaze followed her retreating figure. An old man stopped still to look after her in open admiration, and bestowed an Irish blessing on her. Cars rattled past with their crew of drunken passengers. Coarse jests sent Lota flying past like an Amazon. She was tired now, and the loneliness was descending again with its cruel griping pangs. The doctor was exercising a horse in the field; he would not see her if she put Chloe at a gate and rode through the market-place. She wanted to be alone, to dream of what might have been as the April twilight deepened.

In her own drawing-room she paused with a fresh remembrance of The Homestead. Though the room was shadowed a face watched her from a silver frame on a

table beneath the window. She took up the photograph she had noticed on her first home-coming. The man in the car with Colonel Ross! She put it down hastily and stood in the middle of the room with a sense of dread in her heart.

CHAPTER X

DAMARIS NEWALL stood long by the sweetbriar hedge, watching the few passers-by—an old woman in white stockings with a bundle of spun flax under her shawl, a portly matron driving a herd of cows and at the same time knitting thriftily, a servant lassie hastening home over the beautiful glen country for the Sabbath.

" Ce sont les cadets de Gascogne
De Carbon de Castel-Jaloux

Oeil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne,
Moustache de chat, dents de loup,
Fendant la canaille qui grogne,
Oeil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne
Ils vont,—coiffés d'un vieux vigogne
Dont la plume cache les trous !
Oeil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne,
Moustache de chat, dents de loup."

Damaris was walking up and down the narrow path with something of a martial step. The words came sharp, clear, fantastic in monotonous, strongly-accented periods. Damaris was evidently waiting—her face betrayed unrest, her eyes watched the road vigilantly, while she paced in time to the bold French verse. The tiny pulses at throat and wrist throbbed visibly with expectation, her bosom rose and fell in impatient tumult. She paid little heed to the glories of the setting sun. One would have said that her all was staked on that which she awaited beside the sweetbriar hedge.

Mrs Winter came out of the house and the two women passed into the orchard, talking of their guest. Damaris left the garden with reluctance but a suppressed sort of calm had succeeded her excitement. She was trying now to conceal her hope or her fear. Only the delicate wrist clinging to the widow's arm gave evidence of unusual emotion.

"Odd that she should be riding alone," Mrs Winter remarked. "Her name was Lota Graham, was it? I don't know anybody at Ballymore or I could soon find out all about her."

"She was a beautiful animal and as such I welcomed her," Damaris Newall said carelessly. She had none of her companion's healthy curiosity.

"You are a wonderful admirer of beauty, considering that you are a woman." Mrs Winter sneered slightly. She longed to gossip and discuss the stranger and Damaris foiled her.

"You think men have the finer perceptions, then. I don't know. I love beauty in the abstract. I don't always want to possess it, but I must have something that is not marred and incomplete to remind me of——" She stopped, her speech arrested by the smile on Isa Winter's narrow lips.

"Perce-Bedaine et Casse-Trogne
Sont leurs soubriquets les plus doux;
De gloire leur ame est ivrogne!
Perce-Bedaine et Casse-Trogne
Dans tous les endroits où l'on cogne
Ils se donnent les rendez-vous
Perce-Bedaine et Casse-Trogne
Sont leurs soubriquets les plus doux!"

Her object was accomplished. She piqued Mrs Winter into an expression of emphatic disgust.

"That odious French rubbish again! I am tired of it." Everything incomprehensible was a source of annoyance to Isa Winter. She had a slight knowledge of several languages, but their literary niceties were beyond her. She had read "Le Tulipe Noir" and "Les Trois Mousquetaires," with the aid of a dictionary—she had never heard the name of Rostand.

"Pardon." Damaris' tone was amiable. "Haven't you any idea who Lota Graham may be? There are not many Duchesses of Disdain in Ballymore surely, and you do visit sometimes." She seemed as anxious now to talk about her guest as she had at first been unwilling. "Come, tell me about all the dear ladies of the neighbourhood, whom we haven't shocked by our churlishness, our odd china and our cigarettes."

"You want copy, I suppose. Damaris Newall cares little enough about country-town society for any other purpose. Leave this girl alone. She is too fine a creature to serve as so many others have done as a laughing-stock, a model, a passing whim."

"You are too moral to gossip, then. There are the Munros, the Ross family and the O'Shaughnessy among the élite. Was she of their set, I wonder."

"Gerald Muir would have been with her, if she were. A pretty girl would be a god-send to him in so dull a place, saving your presence."

Damaris' lip curled. Gerald Muir was one of the Irish acquaintances, who had been eager to follow up a first

introduction at The Homestead. He came and went, a frequent guest, giving rise to some scandal in the quiet neighbourhood.

"Perhaps as this girl is married, she may not be a mark for his attentions."

"She may not be in society at all. Some of the owners of those horrid dirty provision-shops make great fortunes and keep a fine stable of horses."

"I must follow the trail, even if it lead to woeful disillusion," Damaris said, undaunted. "I am hard pressed for a new heroine and Lota Graham struck me as having great possibilities. She has pluck and an arrowy wit, in addition to beauty that should land her into romantic adventure."

A footstep had paused a moment by the gate and passed. The sick disappointment wrought her to a strange hardness of utterance. She spoke with the indifferent attitude towards her kind that revolted many while for others it had the fascination of rarety.

"I don't doubt you will wring her secrets from her if she has any, and will expose her heart to the world. Your methods are cruel, for what do you hold sacred? Does Richard Carroll come to-night?" The elder woman had perceived, at last, the tense straining of the small white face she idolised in some sort.

"It is the usual night." The postman was at the gate. Damaris had heard his tread from afar and was ready to receive the bundle of letters. A quiver of eager anxiety caused her slight form to tremble as she sorted

the packet. "Two for you and one for the cook; only three for me, but Richard brings all the business letters." Damaris slipped a piece of money into the man's hand. "You are always toiling up here," she said smiling. He muttered some clumsy words of thanks and ambled off with thoughts of M'Grady's gin-shop in his narrow peasant anticipations.

Damaris waited till the bent form passed out of sight and Mrs Winter vanished in the direction of the kitchen.

"I must go and dress," she said to herself with an enigmatic laugh. "This won't do for Richard and a business confab. Frippery always seems to deprive him of his usual eloquence. It must be that muslin gown with the frills of elegant simplicity. He won't know that it cost fifteen guineas—he'll imagine that I followed Ruskin's exhortations as to rustic needlework."

Ten years seemed to have dropped from her when she came down again to the long old-fashioned dining-room, where she chose to give audience to her legal adviser and faithful friend. There was gaiety in her smile as she greeted him at eight o'clock in the quaint hall with the mastiff by her side. The suggestion of a pose did not enter Richard Carroll's mind. He accepted Damaris in her simplicity as he would have in the dress of an empress. He was conscious that her dainty draperies were in complete harmony with the background of dark oak and dazzling firelight, but the details of her dress he noticed little. His knowledge was wide but it did not include feminine fashion within its catholic range nor

did his acute observation notice the slight trace of art in Damaris' manner.

They were alone in the modest parlour with its hunting-prints, its high-backed chairs and square tables before Damaris spoke.

"Have you many papers?" she asked abruptly.

Carroll started and his eager face fell. He was a slight, spare man with a boyish vivacity of expression and thoughtful grey eyes. There was a suggestion of patience and firm endurance about his mouth, sensitive like the eyes to every mood and word. Burly masculinity might have despised him as womanish and delicate, but a shrewder judge would mark the hardy sinews of a trained athlete beneath the scholar's stoop.

"I have a whole batch of unimportant letters, and one or two that need your attention."

"Did you find out if that case was genuine?"

"The girl is very young, unprotected, and in sore temptation," Richard said. "Some of her story you know already—the rest is here." He handed a letter to her and walked to the window. An owl hooted from some haunt in the high, overhanging cliffs, an eerie, human cry that stirred a deep vein of melancholy within him. Damaris broke the silence sharply.

"She must be helped, of course. Will money be acceptable, or must one go through the farce of finding work for her? No doubt she can write as well as Bunny Weir and the like, but the market is glutted with the pretty pathos and sweet sentimentalism of that school of fiction. It would be healthier for her to nurse other

women's babies or to bring up a brood of her own. Couldn't we marry her to that protégé of yours and pack them off to the colonies ? "

" Hardly feasible, I think. They are both delicate, and he is likely to be stone deaf in a few years' time. You know my views on the subject of matrimony."

She laughed rather harshly. " The coupling of such as possess health certificates only," she commented. " Well well ! Send the girl a cheque for two hundred. She's a cousin of mine, isn't she ? "

" You are generous indeed," Carroll remonstrated. " Has Hardy ceased to sponge on you ? "

She gave a weary gesture of dissent. Her face became worn and pinched. The cares of a stormy life of more than thirty years were written on it, not with a light touch.

" He's a regular drain, of course, so I don't feel his inroads so much. There is still money in the bank, I suppose ? "

" Plenty—plenty. But you should save. Your last book brought in a royal revenue. If you worked steadily instead of by fits and starts. Last winter you were laid up with overwork and two years ago you had to rest at Algiers. Is it the same now ? " There was tender sympathy in his voice and manner, but Damaris shrank from him, as if he stung her with reproach.

" Resting ? No such good fortune. I came here in search of inspiration. Rather a sweet old place, isn't it ? But you don't care for the country. You are a true follower of your beloved Lamb. You were in Paris

last autumn, by the way. Did you see the new actress, Mme. Morel ? "

" No. Réjane, Bernhardt, Dusé. I was lucky, was I not ? Who is Mme. Morel ? "

Damaris was looking through some papers and did not reply for a moment.

" She's a new star, who comes to England for the first time this year. Rather good in Ibsen and once made a hit as my favourite Roxane ; but I've never seen her act. It's an odd strain in *your* Puritan blood, this love of the dramatic art. I wonder if I could act ? " She was leaning back in one of the oak chairs and her eyes shone with starry brilliance. A faint, delicious perfume exhaled from the folds of her muslin dress. Carroll knew that scent and was stifled by it. He even caught a glimpse of thin white paper beneath the diaphanous folds of lace.

" You lack the passion and emotional force necessary for success on the stage," he answered. " You are unable to throw off your natural reticence before strangers. You would find it impossible to reveal your genius to an audience few of whom could appreciate it. You possess none of that universal sympathy, which is able to impose all that it feels on minds it touches only for an hour." He spoke with the finality of one who is absolute on the point under discussion. As a dramatic critic, there were few men who ventured to withstand his opinion. He guessed that his words would be unpalatable, but he refused to tamper with his honesty, even for the sake of Damaris Newall.

She smiled rather wearily, and shook her head. "You never descend to flattery. Well, one cannot have every gift, and even you acknowledge that I can write."

His praise was warm enough to bring the flush to her cheeks that rendered her beautiful. She valued this man's criticism the more because it seldom erred in appraising others.

"Are you tired of writing?" he asked. "Give it up for a time and go abroad. You would come back with fresh vigour; you might write another book like 'The Wind along the Waste.' That came after a fallow period. Why should you not receive inspiration again?"

She breathed as if with pain and closed her eyes. "*That* will never return," she said. "I was young then, Richard; I was in Paradise."

"Traherne will never know the honour done him, I suppose. Is that old trouble to come between you and happiness even now?"

"It *is* my happiness, all that I shall ever know. I am not like other women as you have often told me. I Damaris Newall.

> "'Philosophe, Physicien,
> Rimeur, bretteur, Musicien,
> Et voyageur aërien,
> Grand riposteur du tac au tac
> Aimant aussi—pas pour son bien!'"

"You are still fond of Cyrano," he said with a faint smile. "We have that taste in common at least, though *you* do not love the theatre."

"I have been annoying Isa all day by quotations. She hates my 'Cyrano' days. What *is* this nonsense of Timperley's about the new novel?"

"He wants it as soon as possible, says that it must come out this year. Didn't you sign an agreement that it should?"

"I believe so, but I didn't mean to keep it. I can't write here. I have no source of inspiration. Timperley wants a full-blooded romance. I can't write on anything but nightingales and cherry-blossoms; for the human atmosphere is sorely wanting."

"Why seclude yourself? It must be lonely in this Antrim farmhouse, and you are often worried by Mrs Winter. She isn't a congenial companion for you in the throes of composition."

"She keeps quiet and doesn't take an interest in my work. Also, she looks after business affairs and saves money for me. I have no faculty that way. You remember the old days, when I spent my last sixpence on a 'bus-ride along the embankment and bought books instead of bread-and-butter. The more one has, the more one needs. How horribly precarious my means of livelihood may prove! If I should lose my power, my 'shaping spirit of imagination'—if Roland were to die, or—to marry——"

Carroll turned to her with sharp remonstrance. "You are not to talk like this. As if you could ever fail now that you are high among the writers of the age. Your power will grow as experience becomes fuller. I was on your old ground last autumn after I left Paris. I

met a woman, who interested me strangely on Mont. St. Michel."

"Ah, yes, you told me. She was spiritual of the spiritual and 'mated with a clown.' I wonder if you had any affinity for her after all." There was raillery in her words that made Carroll wince.

"I thought she wanted help or protection. There was such a look of pride and humiliation on her face. If she had not vanished the next day, I should have spoken to her."

"Chivalrous as ever. You ought to have lived in the time of Du Guesclin. There is so little scope for heroism nowadays. Ask Timperley to wait and send me some money. I want clothes and ornaments, even in Antrim. My creditors must wait. I can satisfy them soon."

There was a short discussion as to finance and the selling of some shares, broken by the entrance of Mrs Winter with a supper tray. Richard Carroll refused to stay for the night in spite of Damaris' protests.

"Punctilious of my honour," she said laughing. "Surely Isa is sufficient chaperone. Look at her! English, a married woman, a knitter of socks and a baker of scones. Well, if you will have it so, good-bye."

She walked to the gate, and his last glimpse from the turn of the cliff road showed her, standing motionless, a small, white figure in flowing robes. Was it fancy, or did she hold a hand against the folds of her bosom,

whence the Indian perfume had breathed softly ?" He paused, and the words came to his ear :

" Oeil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne."

The swing of the metre had caught Damaris' wilful fancy, but why did she revert to the tragi-comedy that was present in his mind to-night with cruel insistence ?

CHAPTER XI

THE Whitsun races were amongst the foremost festivities at Ballymore, noted for its breed of horses. Limited to local competition, they were of even greater interest than "The Show." Dr Graham acted as steward and promoter of the sports; he was seldom out of the saddle during the month before the 3rd of June, except when he drove a dashing equipage with his wife at his side.

Lota was taking her first lessons in driving and succeeding remarkably well. Her prowess led to many entreaties that she would enter for the prize in a driving event, which was full of heart-burning for the sporting ladies of the district. Mrs Munro of Castle Mallow had driven before the whole of Ballymore and the surrounding neighbourhood. Molly M'Bride even rode in the steeplechase; Kate had once won a fine silver-mounted whip at the Cushengorm Horse Show. George's eagerness prevailed at last and Lota awaited her first appearance as a public character with mingled dread and elation. She was amused by her husband's enthusiastic praise.

"There isn't a horse in the stable she wouldn't ride if I'd let her," he confided to Alan Crawford. "She took to driving as though she'd been a trainer herself. It's wonderful to see her little hands holding in Chloe and Tarki. Lots of men in this town wouldn't dare to handle them."

Crawford laughed his great jolly laugh and slapped

the doctor on the back. "Makes me want to commit matrimony too, by Jove. Your wife is a brick, and I knew it as soon as she dropped like an angel from the skies. Mary swears by her."

Mary was the gentle, elderly sister, whose frail grasp kept the little man from ruin. He drank and gamed and flirted; he was seldom seen to work or follow any reputable pursuit; but somewhere deep down in his heart there was reverence for women, inspired by a love that had never failed.

The red-haired, merry Don Juan was a hero to his sister, though his respect among others was tarnished by sins which she prayed over and forgave. Mrs Hamilton had warned Lota of Mr Crawford's "shocking laxity and underbred habits," and for a while the warning had caused a certain shrinking fear; but there were so many who were not sheltered by the parsonic approval that it was impossible not to suspect exaggeration, and Lota decided that her husband's friends must be made welcome. She saw very little, in reality, of the men who came at all hours to drink the doctor's "Bushmills" and examine his horses—they were satisfied with a smile of recognition at their entrance and a shake of the hand on any chance encounter.

The evening of the sports[1] was cold for the season, and a strong wind blew from the east, disappointing those who had anticipated summer so far as to lay up dainty muslin and floral millinery.

[1] In Antrim it is the custom to hold these sports from 7 P.M. to 9 P.M.

Jean came to the Octagon House for the day from the Cottage Hospital, where she was established as matron, and Mr and Mrs Kelly drove on to the ground in the doctor's wagonette. Kate was anxious to assume her old dictatorial attitude towards her sister-in-law.

"Why don't you go and talk to people instead of sticking here on the stand?" she said shrewishly. "Mrs M'Connell is bowing to you, and the Gillespies and the Crawfords. You ought to ask about their horses. Don't take any notice of Molly M'Bride—she looks a dreadful sight in that short skirt and old felt hat. I wonder she isn't ashamed to keep a hunter, if she can't afford to put a decent rag on her back."

The wide field stretched smooth and green before the stand, dotted with groups of startling figures. George was prominent in the enclosures, a loose fawn coat hanging in pleats from his shoulders, a flower in his button-hole, and the most racy of hats cocked over one ear. He was talking to Crawford, who wore as dashing a costume, but paraded its smartness less visibly than the doctor. He flourished his odd tweed hat to Mrs Graham and strode up to her, leaving a knot of men in roars of laughter at his waggish humour. He passed Kate with a cool nod, for she had never appealed to his jaded taste. He admired youth and innocence or a fire of bold raillery and a handsome figure.

"D'ye feel nervous?" he asked Lota. "Your race isn't on for a long time. Seen all the cattle? Not a bad lot on the whole. I like a bit of good horse-flesh, but Graham is the man for a proper appreciation of horses

and women." He bowed and ogled Lota with his small, light eyes. She looked strikingly beautiful in her close-fitting costume and smart cloth toque. Her mouth with its full red lips and her brilliant eyes excited his admiration particularly. He was rather a connoisseur in eyes, as many a fair barmaid had found to her cost.

"Hulloa, Muir!" he shouted in his ringing voice, as Colonel Ross's car arrived with its contingent of guests. "I thought you were dead and buried!"

"I hoped *you* were," Mr Muir responded amiably. "How is Ballymore? Still holding its races, in spite of anarchism and Simple Life?"

A short colloquy followed between the two men at a few paces from the stand. Lota had leisure to observe the distinguished, attractive face, which, in counterfeit, had once seemed to flash glances of comprehension into hers. Gerald Muir was tanned by foreign suns into a healthy brown, his features were well-cut and his eyes remarkable for a piercing quality, that was at variance with his languor of speech. His voice was gay, and, heard in all the clangour of Ulster tongues, was refreshing to an English ear.

This was the Englishman she had been wont to associate with her future lot, possessing only it might be the most ordinary attributes of birth and breeding, but one whom no woman could refuse to recognise as her equal.

Mrs Dunbar joined Lota as the two men walked off together to enter the ring. Her two daughters were

excited as to the merits of different steeds and ready to point out the magnates of the neighbourhood.

"Who is that lady?" Mabel exclaimed, craning her neck to get a better view of a late arrival. "What a sweet hat!"

Lota's heart beat faster as she met Damaris Newall's smiling glance. She had often dwelt on her brief glimpse of Bohemia or what was nearest to it in primitive, conventional Antrim, but she had never repeated the visit, conscious of danger to her new-found serenity in the very atmosphere of The Homestead.

Damaris Newall bore a new aspect to-day. Her style was assertive, fashionable, her manner that of the charming woman of the world. She was dressed in white cloth heavily braided with gold, and wore a great plumed hat, that suited her to perfection. She surveyed the course through her field-glasses, unconscious of the scrutiny that beset her. Mrs Winter was slow to mount beside the small, conspicuous epitome of vanity; she was unwilling to relinquish the joy of gossip with an acquaintance she had met.

Mrs Dunbar surveyed the strangers with cold criticism.

"That's the lady who lives near Drumsheagh," Gladys said, after some discussion. "They say she lives in a tiny old farmhouse and smokes in the orchard." The girl's voice lowered a little.

"Ah! People don't call on her," Mrs Dunbar commented gravely. "She doesn't know anyone." But at that moment Colonel Ross and his nephew took their places on either side of the social outcast and became

absorbed in conversation. They took her off at last to exhibit the points of the different horses in an enclosure, where only stewards were permitted.

Lota felt unreasonably jealous of Damaris Newall. She was tired of the Dunbars and their kind. They had begun to laud the distinction and grace which had just been the disgraceful lures of an adventuress in their righteous eyes.

Molly M'Bride waved from afar. Wenonah is in splendid form," she shouted, " and George is going to ride her. Awf'lly good of him."

Miss Jean clutched Lota's arm. " Stop him, my dear," she whispered. " These hurdle-races are so dangerous and George is always mad to win when his friends are expecting it."

An evil spirit had taken possession of Lota. She did not intend to play the part of a fussy, over-anxious wife before all these people. " Don't worry," she answered lightly. " George will ride and win. Wenonah is tame enough, for Molly would enter herself if women were allowed in this race."

Miss Jean's gaze was fraught with reproach. She could not believe that Lota was indifferent to her husband's safety, but how hard the voice had sounded! After all, this girl was ignorant of the cruel hazard of racing. Miss Jean subsided into fearful expectation, drawing a fur closely round her neck. It was a poor shelter from the east wind that had pierced her on the long drive—this ramshackle stand of wooden benches.

" How cold that lady in white must be! " Mabel

Dunbar said, as Damaris Newall took her place on an adjacent seat.

"It is lined with sable," Gladys rejoined in awestruck tones. "Do look at her lovely ear-rings and her dear little boots."

Gerald Muir was entertaining his companion, and her laugh sounded merrily on the air. Lota imagined they were making merry over the races, *her* races. She even fancied that George came under their fire of wit.

The horses were led on to the course now and the first race began. No finer animals had been seen at any county event, it was agreed by the spectators, according to custom. Bets were exchanged freely as to the result of the race, and shouts of encouragement rose and mingled from hot partisans. Lota was interested in spite of herself. This was infinitely preferable to "les petits chevaux" as George had once said. She understood his contempt for French pastimes as she watched the noble animals bound from the starting point, but, how she missed the gaiety that would have made the scene exhilarating, the brilliant sunshine, the pretty dresses and the smiling faces. The women around her looked blue, pinched, cross, while the men had the coarse, heavy aspect engendered by devotion to physical pursuits.

George was mounted soon on Wenonah, a handsome black hunter sold for an old song to Molly M'Bride, who had declined to receive so costly a present at his hands. He showed to the greatest advantage on horseback; his broad shoulders and sinewy frame marked him in fine

condition. Alan Crawford looked bloated in comparison for *his* brick-red tint was not the result of open-air exercise alone. A group of admirers surrounded the doctor, auguring all possible success. Molly was flushed and vehement.

"Remember what it means to *us*, if you lose," she said loudly. "Do, do win. You know you can if you try, for there isn't Wenonah's match on the course, the darlint." She helped to tighten a strap, she gave some advice about the bit to which George attended.

"Ay, there's Graham!" rough voices growled below the stand. "Sure *he'll* win if he rides any old crock."

Lota felt conscious of a thrill of pride, which was followed by a moment of bitter humiliation. She had stood up to wave to her husband as he passed, but he did not look in her direction; he had forgotten her presence in the wild rush towards the winning-post. She heard Mr Muir say something half-envious, half-condescending, about "that Irish surgeon's splendid seat," and coloured hotly. She had a strange feeling of enmity towards the man, who compelled her interest by some unaccountable freak of destiny.

She resolved to concentrate her attention on the race and followed George's movements as tensely as Miss Jean, who uttered a choking cry once when Wenonah alighted on the other side of a high hurdle on top of her rider. George sprang to the saddle again with remarkable agility and regained the pace he had lost. The only horse which showed superiority to Wenonah was a sturdy gray, ridden by a prominent member of the county hunt.

Wenonah's dainty action and spirited head made her the favourite and at last by a sudden desperate leap she outdistanced her rival and reached the red flag, first by a single length.

Dr Graham was received enthusiastically by his friends and few of them noticed that he limped slightly as he walked off the field. His first care had been for the winner, breathing uneasily and flecked with foam.

Molly was weeping in her tempestuous Irish way, while she heaped adulation on horse and rider alike. She did not listen to Miss Jean's enquiries when she went up to the stand. She shook the little woman's hand, till the pain was almost intolerable.

"Oh, you ought to be proud of him," she said to Lota. "How I trembled at the end! It was a magnificent spurt but George had saved up for it. He might have won *easily*, if he hadn't been thrown. Hurt? No. He's a reg'lar daisy, always turns up trumps."

"One likes to distinguish one's personality from that of a jockey, after all," Gerald Muir said, unconscious of Lota's presence. "Graham is all right at this sort of thing, but he doesn't exactly shine anywhere out of the stable, you know. Absolute physical perfection, but a bit lacking in the other god-like attributes."

"Did you see the Calcutta races?" Damaris asked abruptly. "You were going to discuss India, not Sandow. The memory of the pleasant vices of a hotter clime would make me feel a little warm even here."

Muir laughed and looked at her with the gleam of the eye that had a touch of cynicism in its amusement. He

wanted to leave Damaris Newall in search of someone, who might introduce him to the girl behind, with the wonderful hair and passionate beauty. His friendship with the owner of The Homestead was a superficial bond —each viewed the other with a touch of distrust. They chatted, however, of Anglo-Indian society, achieving an epigram or two and some smart description. Gerald Muir was never at a loss for flippant anecdotes of a racy pungency. He gave Damaris of his best, knowing that she had an almost masculine love of folly for its own sake.

"I expect we were under different auspices," he concluded, after an account of certain exploits more entertaining than discreet. "Probably you hobnobbed with the Vice-regal set and didn't see any real fun. Oh, I had a decent berth once under Sir Roland Traherne. He didn't care much for functions, neither did I. He had a spice of the devil that endeared him to me. There was a woman——"

"Look! They are going to start the driving," Damaris exclaimed, rising to her feet. "There is *my* friend and *your* friend is actually putting the reins into her hands."

"Eh? That is Graham again, to be sure. Didn't know he was my friend. That *can't* be his wife in the cart. I heard he married last year, but that isn't his wife."

A recollection of the massive, ugly rings on her guest's left hand came to Damaris with sudden conviction. She had remarked them, as hardly the kind of ornament Lota Graham should have worn. How stupid she had been

not to notice the name! Her interest increased as she examined George carefully through her glasses. Yes! He had chosen the great hoop diamond that disfigured the shapely hand of the unknown. Gerald Muir's disgust amused her.

When Lota had been presented with the palm of victory and was led up to the stand to receive congratulations, Damaris added hers to others of a more demonstrative length.

"Why have you not been to see me?" she asked. "Remember, I shall expect you to ride out very soon; I am longing to see Chloe. May I present Mr Muir." The introduction was effected before either of the two were prepared for it. Lota felt a tinge of colour mount to her face and began to talk desperately of the race.

"How splendidly you drive!" Gerald Muir commented. It was the same remark that everyone else had made, but for the first time it conveyed pleasure. The day was no longer dull and she a nobody. Even Mrs Dunbar became tolerable, though she had called twice that week "in a friendly way," once to inform the young châtelaine that Biddy had been found in unlawful colloquy with the butcher-boy at the gate and a second time to complain of a Bach duet with Madeline Escott.

Gerald Muir had the buoyant spirits of the true Irishman, tempered by a certain caustic restraint that forbade exuberance.

Damaris Newall drove off well satisfied. She had seen Mrs Graham's features glowing with interest and ex-

pectation. Just the touch her heroine had needed to serve as a source of inspiration.

"We'll have a grand rechauffée of Indian stories one day at The Homestead," she said, as she bade farewell. "You shall finish that splendid romance you were weaving for me about Sir Roland or Sir Roderick when Mrs Graham absorbed my attention."

"What story was that?" Mrs Winter asked curiously. "I didn't know you were interested in Indian gossip."

"I used to know some of the Anglo-Indian potentates years ago. It is amusing to compare one's opinions of men with a man. My life at Simla and at Calcutta was rather adventurous, Isa. I don't talk to you about it, because I respect the privacy of your dreams."

CHAPTER XII

THE postman had just delivered the evening letters at the Octagon House. Lota took some into the surgery for her husband's perusal. He was in his shirt-sleeves, performing a slight operation on a screaming urchin of eleven. He pushed the patient out unceremoniously, when he had finished, and turned to Lota expectantly.

"Glad to get rid of that young devil," he said, donning his smoking-jacket. "His mother encourages him to abuse me and comes herself, sometimes, to join in. One gets more kicks than halfpence in these cases."

Lota laughed. "Well, I've brought you something that will please you," she said, sitting on a low table, littered with newspapers.

The surgery was sparsely furnished and both chairs were occupied with instruments and bottles. She always preferred to meet her husband in this room, where he was more at ease than he ever seemed elsewhere. Sporting prints adorned the walls, and a riding-whip and a gun. The inkstand was formed from the shoe of a favourite horse and bore an inscription to that effect.

Lota wondered how the doctor combined the two widely different pursuits of medicine and racing. She imagined him conversing disjointedly of the odds against Diamond, and the points of the favourite, while he diagnosed the complaints of fanciful old ladies. She was quite unfamiliar with her husband's professional

side—she was certain, however, that the bland "bedside manner" of such physicians as she had met must be impossible for him. Some day she meant to ask if she might accompany him on his rounds to get an inkling into his daily life. She had determined to be good comrade in everything. She was better able to take the part than many women, owing to her wide Bohemian experience of men and women. There was a boyish freedom in her tastes, an easy adaptation to other habits than her own, and both these attributes facilitated intercourse with a stranger.

George took the note gingerly. He read it through twice and whistled a low whistle between his teeth.

"Pleasure or surprise?" Lota asked with a mischievous demureness.

"Both," he said, tossing back the card of invitation. "Stick it up on the mantelpiece and let old Mother Hamilton see what high society you move in. By Jove! she'll be green with envy to hear we're invited to dine with the Munroes. She is mighty proud of going to the At Homes at Colonel Ross's once a year. We must muster up our best. What will you wear?"

"My blue dress," Lota hazarded doubtfully. She was inwardly amused by George's elation. She had never known the eager anxieties of country-town prestige, and it caused her no special delight to be "taken notice of" by the great people of the neighbourhood.

"You'd better get a new gown," the doctor pursued, wrinkling his high forehead. "They are frightfully togged up at these functions, you know, and it's the

first time they've asked us, though I attend the family. I wonder why they sent us a card. You haven't met any of them, have you ? "

Lota shook her head. " Shouldn't recognise a Munro if I saw one ; but, after all, there's no particular reason why they shouldn't ask us. It's not going out of our station, I hope." There was a spice of satire in her tone. She was amused by the trace of snobbish deference in George's bearing whenever he encountered those of higher social standing. She tried to think it imaginary, but she knew that it was visible to others. Pride forbade her to notice it, yet the least touch stung. She had always held her own everywhere—at the great baronial household of Riga, in the most exclusive musical circles of Leipzig, on the piano-stool of Madame Bonnier. She had faint perceptions of the gulf between hundreds and thousands, between grandfathers and feudal ancestors, between house and castle, dog-cart and brougham.

George played with his loose coins. " It's an honour," he ventured after a pause. " They must have a special reason for asking us to dinner. It's not like a garden-party or a musical affair. They never have large parties, for I've seen the table laid for great occasions. I wonder who we shall meet."

" Colonel Ross, no doubt, and perhaps the Crawfords."

George shook his head.

" Ross is a magnate, so he may be there ; but Crawford would hardly be invited. He doesn't lay claim to much in the way of society."

If the Rosses went, their nephew would probably accompany them. A sudden distaste for the affair came over Lota.

"Need we go?" she asked. "It won't be much fun if we don't know anybody."

George gazed at her in blank surprise, a ludicrous expression of horror on his face.

"Of course we must go. What do you mean? We shall be introduced. I never thought you minded company."

"I don't," Lota said. It was true that she did not "mind company," but she felt a growing dislike of the evening's pleasure.

"Well, I'll answer it, and then we shall not have an excuse to back out," she said, springing down from the table.

"Your dress!" George recalled her as she was leaving the surgery. "I don't think you've anything quite fine enough for such an occasion. Order a new one in Belfast and give what you like for it. You'll look handsomer than the other ladies, if you're rigged out properly." He was busy unlocking a drawer of his desk. "I'll write you a cheque or perhaps you'd rather have notes," he said. He counted out several of the dirty one-pound notes current in Ulster, and handed them to her, flushed by his generosity. It should never be said that his wife was shabby—he wanted her to outshine Ballymore completely.

Lota hesitated. She had been unable to overcome a shamefaced repugnance to scenes of this kind, and she

had hitherto spent only her own little store on her personal expenses. There was part of Frances' present still left.

"It's very kind of you," she murmured, feeling awkward and self-conscious for the first time in her life, "but I have plenty of money of my own."

George laughed noisily. He understood women, he thought, and their foibles and fancies. He made the common masculine blunder of failing to recognise that there are exceptions to the usual types, and he had always considered Lota essentially feminine.

"You needn't be afraid I can't afford it," he assured her. "We're not in debt, and there's a sum at the Bank in my name still. Come, don't be silly about it. You like clothes as much as other girls, if you *are* married."

Lota took the money and thanked him, mentally cursing her own scruples. George was unlikely to see the matter from her standpoint. Why trouble about such a trifle when the debt was already so large?

She owed it to her husband to please him in the small ways that count for so much in married life. She hated to be prudish and thin-skinned.

"What colour do you like best?" she asked, ready to make amends for her blunder.

"White or cream or pink," George said feebly. "I don't know the names of all these new shades. That's a pretty frock you're wearing."

"It's rose-colour," Lota reminded him. "Well, shall it be cream?"

George studied her gravely. "Most colours suit you,"

he concluded politely; "but cream is rather young, isn't it?"

Lota smiled. "Old age advances rapidly," she said. "Shall we decide on a stone-grey?"

"That isn't gay enough for a swagger dinner."

"Violet, black, sober brown, yellow?"

"Ah, yellow. That would suit you. I've never seen you in it, either." George had a decided weakness for bright tints. He liked a vivid, showy costume that marked the wearer out at once.

She would have enjoyed this foolish discussion if the other had been of the same humour. As it was, she was tired of the dress and anticipated small pleasure from it.

"Daffodil silk would be rather uncommon," she suggested.

"Yes, that's what I want it to be—uncommon," George put in, rolling a cigarette. "You can carry clothes so well with your figure and air. Kate never put her dresses on properly, somehow."

Lota had a hot sense of rebellion at the praise. He adjudged her points as he weighed his animals. He was proud of her hair and eyes and person, in the same way as he was proud of Chloe's glossy coat and splendid action. He liked to parade his possessions for other men's admiration, and he thought in both cases that his own keen discernment was exhibited by the superiority of his property over his fellows. The idea galled while she felt her husband's gaze upon her. She was just so much beauty and spirit and youth, bought at a high price and maintained in fine condition. If she aged

and grew plainer, what would her fate be? She would some day lose the claim to esteem she now possessed. She knew that her real character was unknown ground to her husband, that he cared little to discover her spiritual potentialities or her true self, whereas he had a vivid desire to find out her capabilities of the practical kind, such as might be turned to account in impressing those who had not.

"Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men." This had been the rule of her conduct. Was she to descend to the baseness of truckling to wealth and state through the twist of her yoke-fellow's nature?

A revolt from the tie was in her heart. The small surgery had nothing in it for her, and it was his room—the place on which his individuality was impressed. She had made a rash contract and she must fulfil it at the dictate of honour as she had fulfilled all compacts but in the letter, surely not in the spirit too. George was easily blinded and satisfied. Depths of sensitive consciousness would scarcely await her actions. She would be accepted by results while the motive-springs were hidden.

For the first time she was thankful that there was the element of the cloddish in her husband. Life would have been impossible had he guessed even dimly at what passed in her breast.

George was puffing at a cigarette, as he puffed when at leisure and pleased by some specially gracious act on the part of Providence. He had forgotten that thank-

less urchin and the trials of a varied practice; he was peacefully absorbed in dreams of social advancement.

Lota had been a lucky find. She was a thoroughbred creature, and a sound animal. She would feel at ease, he believed, in any surroundings, however unusual.

"Then it is to be amber." Her voice broke in on his musings. "We've settled the momentous question. I'll take Kate with me to choose the silk to-morrow. She loves a day's shopping."

"She hasn't much taste," George interposed with a doubtful recollection of another fête, which had not been unmixed joy, owing to his sister's flamboyant garb and exaggerated determination to appear in her element. "You'd better not let Kate have anything to do with it."

Lota explained that Mrs Kelly's rôle was to be strictly defined as that of looker-on and left him. She let herself speculate when alone on the probability of Gerald Muir's admiring amber.

CHAPTER XIII

A LONG, tree-fringed avenue led up to Castle Mallow, the estate which Mrs Munro's late husband had left to her in trust for their numerous family. The house was one of greater pretension than any in the neighbourhood, and had a far more imposing entrance than Castle Shaughnessy, which was castle only in name.

The drive was already packed with vehicles when Dr Graham drove up in his car, skilfully picking his way to the front and pointing out the owners of different vehicles to his wife. She was amused at the novel mode of arrival—it had seemed quite the most reasonable thing to sit on an outside car in evening dress and expose one's head to the elements. It was doubtful whether George had ever thought of procuring a covered carriage. Apart from the ignominy of being driven by anyone else, he hated to be shut in, or restrained from the use of his hands.

The dinner-party had assembled when they entered the drawing-room together, and Mrs Munro was obviously relieved that they completed the tale of guests. She was a very thin, dark woman, who looked too young to be the mother of the shy débutante daughter, nervously trying to talk to Colonel Ross. She dressed in the height of fashion and took care to keep in touch with the world, though she spent the greater part of the year at the Castle, and the greater part of her income on farming.

Lota was placed next to a dull, pompous old gentleman, but on her other side was Gerald Muir, who congratulated himself in escaping from the full tedium of Daisy Munro. He did not care for young girls unless they were smart or entertaining.

"You owe me the debt of comparative youth," he said smiling. "I can't think why you should have been paired with crabbed age and a crabbed age that is immature as to conversation. Don't you find dining steady your nerves for driving? It is peaceful and healthy and solemn."

"I haven't any nerves," Lota replied, "and if 'a brave man is only shocked at dulness,' surely a brave woman must shrink from ennui, equally affrighted."

"You read Stevenson, I observe," was Gerald's comment. "I never dare to quote because I should expose myself to the condemnation of inaccuracy, if I did, and I take a riotous joy in inaccuracy, which enrages the critic. I am not a brave man—I fear old ladies, and temperance lecturers and the slur of respectability."

"Then you don't spend much time in Ballymore, which is not given up to shuddering tremor."

"I spend a lot of time in Ballymore, but I flee to the bogs and brown streams, wherein much salmon abides."

The ancient sphinx here ventured on a prophecy of rain, and Gerald turned to Daisy Munro. She knew that he found her stupid and wished her mother had not insisted on her stopping up to dinner. Her dress was quite the shabbiest there—an old white muslin hastily re-furbished by the maid. She cast a covetous glance

at Lota's toilette—the delicate primrose silk became the dark, pale wearer to rare perfection. It was low-cut, shimmering, and exquisitely designed.

Lower down the table sat Damaris Newall in the place of honour, for she was known at Castle Mallow and cherished as a famous writer. She talked a great deal and lightly to anybody who would respond.

"I haven't heard a really sulphurous and original oath since I came to Ireland," she said dismally. "I had hoped great things and am fit to weep for disappointment. As for the so-called brogue, one might as well go to Boulogne to hear Breton." She flung out her words with a mock defiance. It was difficult to talk about anything that mattered before so dull an audience. She disliked an audience; indeed, she approved of tête-à-tête as the only true pleasure of the conversationalist.

"Can't someone provide Miss Newall with an Irish flavour of some kind?" Colonel Ross put in genially. He admired Damaris with the reverence of a commonplace man for the genius that has arrived.

"There will be the hiring-fair next week," Mrs Munro suggested. "You won't hear English at all events if you go among the people. Ask Dr Graham to make you one of his collectors. We have the Hospital Day then, and go about with boxes in our hands and red badges on our arms."

"And solicit alms of the poor on behalf of the poor," Damaris commented. "Very proper. May I know more of this Saturnalia? Mrs Winter might not approve

as it takes place on a Saturday. We spend that day in close fasting and penance."

"Are you a follower of New Jerusualem?" Gerald Muir asked languidly.

"I never thought of it. Rather a pleasing departure from orthodoxy. I have embraced many sects, but the only phase that lasted was Roman Catholicism. The music and the masses and the priestly magnetism lingered long after I had forsaken the faith."

"When were you a Catholic?" Mrs Ross demanded, fixing her one steady eye on this heretical young woman. The district was ultra-Protestant and held continued orgies on Orange lines.

"Once upon a time when I lived under the roof of a dear old convent in Brittany. The sisters led me to their chapel and the cathedral windows completed the conversion. That was a Paradise on earth."

She was speaking seriously now, and a sigh escaped her. Flippancy generally changed to truth, for she was not light of temperament, unless in contact with buoyant exuberance of mind.

Mrs Munro filled in the blank of silence as tactfully as she could, and once more reverted to the topic of well-garbed mendicancy. "You must gain Miss Newall," she said, appealing to Dr Graham. "She would be invaluable—her native wit would be irresistible, I am sure. No churl could refuse a copper to the writer of 'The Wind along the Waste.'"

Damaris frowned slightly. She resented fulsome praise, especially from the unliterary.

"I might get the money," she said slowly, "but I wouldn't undertake to keep it till the end of the day, if the shops were as tempting as usual. Is there any check on one's honesty?"

"I examine the contents of the bags and detect deficiencies by my valuable gift of reading faces," Gerald Muir assured her. "Last year a certain knave of the vicinity retired with the lady under his protection and spent the proceeds of a clamorous half-hour on ice-cream at M'Grady's. You know M'Grady's, of course. He sells vegetables incidentally, but the real traffic takes place in a parlour at the back, decorated with a unique and chaste collection of china dogs."

Dr Graham cleared his throat. "I don't think," he explained uneasily to Miss Newall, "that anyone really did take the money. Mr Muir must have been mistaken."

"They were caught red-handed," Gerald said firmly, "and if you doubt me, I'll go far to identify the culprit. Sure, he's a solicitor of this town."

There was a general outburst of laughter, the jest being of a local nature, for did not the profession of the law claim at least half of the well-to-do youth of Ballymore, the people being notoriously given to litigation.

"I don't think I could elude your scrutiny, so it would be a profitless day," Damaris said languidly.

"It would be rich in experience, for you'd have at least twenty substantial offers of marriage. The usual result of a well-turned plea for coin is the offer of a matrimonial alliance: 'Would ye marry?' and 'Are

you promised?' marking the first dawn of courtship, instead of concluding it."

"That is true enough," Mrs Munro attested. "Daisy here had great difficulty in warding off the attentions of a burly farmer, who wanted to call on Sunday and clench the bargain."

"Only I couldn't understand a bit what he said," Daisy murmured, blushing.

"It was dialect of the choicest," Mr Muir said. "You long for the incomprehensible, Miss Newall. Come and join the ranks of the courted."

"I'm too old," Damaris objected, "and I hate the smell of peat when it doesn't come from a chimney, and I should take refuge with the M'Grady and the china bow-wows, and you would find me and hale me before your uncle."

"I should temper justice with mercy," Colonel Ross said with an old-fashioned bow.

"Why do you mistrust your own honesty?" Lota asked, curious to gauge Damaris' real meaning.

Damaris Newall was beautiful to-night. Her gown flashed and scintillated with every movement of her lithe body—it revealed her grace and her small perfection of limb beneath its flowing black folds and coiled about her feet. There was a suggestion of the snake and its cold brilliance about the whole woman with her passionless mouth and cynical detachment from humanity. The small oval face had a touch of vivid colour on each cheek, but otherwise she was a contrast of black and white. Lota noticed for the first time the

wonderful character of her hands. They were very fleshless, very fair and fashioned so that they betrayed remarkable tenacity and delicacy. They were helpless in their gestures and even appealing, but there was force and strange persistence in their grasp, one felt instinctively. Beneath the fragile frame, too, was strength and iron determination. It was as if the outer attributes were a disguise or a mockery, so pitilessly did they conceal the real Damaris. Was she intellect personified, or was it a human heart that throbbed in the little, restless beats that could be seen now and then to rise from neck and breast ?

Lota had asked her question drawn by the magnetic, dreamy look bent upon her. She resented the scrutiny of this hidden spirit.

" My honesty is of the flexible kind. It isn't Sunday-school stuff that proves for the best to its possessor," Damaris answered.

She had meant to make Mrs Graham join in the conversation. The husband was unspeakable—he weighed upon her like a nightmare. An impulse of pity passed into a less kindly one of curiosity as she contrasted the ill-assorted bride and bridegroom. There was excellent material in this girl of fiery pride, yoked to a mate who had neither mind nor apprehension.

" Honesty is hard to define," Lota went on, answering the challenge. " Sometimes it is honester to oneself not to be honest with others."

Gerald Muir noticed the slight tremor that ran through her frame.

"We all have some pet little dishonesty, after all," Damaris said airily. "I never return calls except when I know that the called-on are out. It is an ineradicable vice, which was born with me."

"For my part, I am quite unable to pay back the loans advanced by my golf-caddie from time to time under strong pressure," Gerald Muir added. "But I have the excuse of having sojourned long in the land of poetry and pilfering."

"Your India seems to be the India of beggars and bazaars, of scent and intrigue and sentiment—the India of Mrs Steel." Damaris was palpably annoyed by Mr Muir's excuse.

"We'll compare our views later," he said smiling. "You are sure to be able to instruct me. I lived there for ten years, probably not seeing half of what you saw in six months."

"I will undertake to say that you might live there another ten, without seeing what I saw," Miss Newall said enigmatically.

Mrs Ross put her down mentally as conceited to the verge of harmlessness. She disapproved of her nephew on principle and snubbed him as far as he allowed in private, but she did not care to see him derided by a woman. In truth, he was the only polished gentleman present to her thinking, with the exception of that gallant veteran, her husband. Pride of race was willing to cover many faults of youth, and Gerald had always retained the stamp of the man of family.

"You haven't confessed your weakness," she was reminded.

"I cannot own to ever having wilfully defrauded in the smallest particular," was her icy remark. Many people said that she had entangled the Colonel by a specious parade of wealth which she did not possess, but perhaps years had buried the fraud by means of the love, which certainly had inspired it.

"I have twice travelled first with a third ticket," Lota declared, unabashed. "It was on the Metropolitan.

"You are committed out of your own mouth of the most scandalous probity," Damaris cried, "for who else would have bought a ticket at all to travel on that line?"

Daisy Munro looked startled. The conversation seemed to her to be an indecent revelation of all that should have been hidden. It was as if a child in the nursery should triumphantly exclaim, "I stole the jam," glorying in what should have brought shame, if not penitence.

"Your horrid past now, doctor." George was uneasy, although he laughed uproariously with the rest.

"I have occasionally guyed a dealer," he said complacently. It was a fault held venal among lovers of horse-flesh.

"I shan't offer for Chloe now, as I intended," Mr Muir said, upraising a pious hand of horror; "and look to your pocket at the next fair-day, Graham. You'll take some of your cattle home again."

Lota inwardly blamed Damaris Newall for beginning a discussion, which had made most of the diners un-

comfortable, and Mrs Munro gave the signal, wishing she had been better able to curb her guest's love of mockery.

Later, Madeline Escott played her violin and restored general amity. She looked odder than ever in a short, princess satin robe, which revealed her feet lamentably.

"She is David to my Saul," Miss Newall whispered to Gerald Muir. "When my new gown is a failure or when I have a bad review, I send for her to drive away the vapours."

"She's an 'animated gargoyle,'" he responded flippantly. "But the primrose-robed lady is ecstatically handsome." He moved away to turn over the leaves for Lota, who had succeeded Madeline at the piano. Damaris smiled with a touch of bitterness. "La plupart des hommes emploient la meilleure partie de leur vie à rendre l'autre misérable." The words of La Bruyère stung her conscience slightly as she watched George Graham's adoration of his wife. Stupid and material he might be: there was that in his red, complacent face to-night which betrayed the purer passion, "the desire of the moth for the star," "of the night for the morrow." He was not altogether coarse-fibred while that expression lit up his eyes. Damaris beckoned him imperiously to her side. She could talk of hunting, though she never rode; she could discuss horseflesh with the skill of a trainer. She wanted to discover what potentialities were hidden beneath the dull exterior. She wanted also to give Gerald Muir his chance.

CHAPTER XIV

THE apple-blossom in the orchard had fallen and the birds were pecking at the early fruit, rejoicing in the clemency of a mistress, who did not approve of barbarous netting. The roses were in bloom, and the leaves at their greenest.

"Nothing to beat this orchard in the whole of Antrim," Gerald Muir said enthusiastically. "You need not imagine you are going away before tea, Mrs Graham. *I* am tired if *you* are not." He was reclining in a long deck-chair with a cigarette—one of Damaris' cigarettes and worthy of her genius, as he remarked.

Lota cast an uneasy glance at the occupant of a hammock swung high up in the trees. "Miss Newall will send us away soon because we spoil her romance. We are too commonplace to people this orchard. I am more in keeping with Featherstone Place."

She had to remind herself that this was not her sphere, to crush down the happiness that was so dangerously sweet.

"Tobacco and horses and whisky-drinkers," Gerald Muir thought with a pang of pity. Aloud he said, "Put us into your next book, Miss Newall, and name it 'An Octave in an Orchard.' We are not eight but our number is increasing towards the complete range of keys. Miss Escott inspires the metaphor. Ye gods! What a delicious frock!"

Madeline's short green satin gown did not cover her ungainly ankles, clothed in yellow silk stockings, both arms were bare from the elbow, and she wore a floral hat, " for all the world like a birthday cake," as Gerald muttered. He abhorred all that was displeasing to the eye and seldom troubled to conceal his distaste.

Annette was dressed in the height of Ballymore fashion, simperingly conscious of a critical gaze. She had long since decided that Gerald Muir's brown, lean visage was infinitely superior to the doctor's " full-blown comeliness " and had been flattered by an invitation to a select gathering, intended for Madeline alone.

She greeted Miss Newall with gushing pleasure but bowed stiffly to Lota. " If we had known you were coming, we would have driven you," Madeline said. " How did you get here ? "

" On Chloe's back. You have brought Straddy ? " Lota's tone was eager. She had learnt that Madeline Escott could indeed " play a little."

" I left him in the hall," said the musician in her plaintive snuffle ; " he is nice and warm in his case, but I don't bring him out of doors."

" The china-dog creature," as Gerald rudely dubbed her, seemed in danger of monopolising the occasion. She felt herself appreciated by at least two of the company and her spirits rose proportionately.

" Why aren't you wearing a prettier gown to-day ? " she asked Damaris reproachfully. " I don't like you in that tailor-made white serge. You have some lovely princess robes, and you do look so artistic in them."

Damaris murmured an apology. The violinist's execrable taste jarred on her, who was strangely sensitive to beauty of form and colour. Annette rebuked her sister in an audible aside.

"You are dreadful, Madeline. As if you knew anything about clothes! What will Mr Muir think of us?"

Madeline subsided in an ungraceful attitude upon the grass and gave herself up to an animated dialogue on cookery with Mrs Winter. She was a frank gourmande, and the widow's recipes were famous.

"Here come the missing notes of our little symphony," Gerald exclaimed.

A trim, golden-haired little woman was flitting towards them through the trees. A maid followed her with tea accessories of a delectable nature.

"Miss Bunny Weir." Damaris presented the newcomer to the company with an indulgent smile. "Have you killed that poor man?" she asked as Miss Weir settled down at her feet.

"I had to do it. Nobody would dream how hard it was for me. My wrist ached and my brain was whirling and I caught glimpses of you all out here picnicking. Never mind! He had his day."

"How lightly crime is spoken of by one so gentle!" Gerald Muir said with mock gaiety. "What have you done with the body? Not under Miss Newall's chintz-covered lounge, I trust. And yet you don't look as though you'd been digging."

There was an air of Dresden-china prettiness about Miss Weir that disarmed suspicion. She was plump,

sweet-voiced, with the roundest of faces and dimpled hands.

"I compressed it. I'm great at that kind of thing. Won't someone tell a story about a Banshee or a Bath-bun? I hate all my stories—they're so stupid and I get so tired writing 'em. When I was coming up in the train yesterday a dear old cushion of a grandame offered me a magazine. 'No, thank you,' I said, politely but firmly. 'I help to make 'em.' The next drink of whisky I *had* to accept."

"Your line is not humour," Miss Newall remarked. "Tragedy comes better from your rosebud lips. Tell Mr Muir the sad history of the 'Man with the Piebald Beard.'"

Bunny Weir shook her curly head.

"I don't tell stories when I'm having tea. As I mentioned before, I hate stories, and my own particularly. It isn't affectation; it's homely truth. But of course you won't believe me. When I speak right hot off my soul, someone always thinks I'm a humbug." She turned an accusing glance towards Annette, who had been quite unprepared for Damaris' last guest.

"We appreciate your candour," Gerald Muir said, drawing his chair nearer. "Have some cake and I'll try not to tell the charming snake legend with which I was ready to favour the company."

Bunny took a large piece of cake and then held up the same to display a newly-made circular bite. "The Marble Arch," she explained solemnly. "Don't you love Seymour Hicks? or perhaps Grossmith is your passion."

She had turned to Lota, inquiry in her childlike eyes.

Lota took Miss Weir literally, as that young lady liked to be taken.

"Penley has all the love I can spare from myself," she answered; "but I'm quite a back number as regards English plays. I haven't been inside a London theatre for five years."

Miss Weir shrieked and held up a pair of small hands, one of which still clutched a macaroon.

"Why, you just haven't lived. You might as well have been buried all that time. We'll go and see Becky together. There's a new actress coming out in London, and those who know say she'll simply bring the house down. I'm dying for a new sensation, so I shall plump for Madame Morel."

"Let us all meet in town this summer," Gerald Muir put in. "We could make up a really jolly little party under the auspices of Miss Newall." He bent his dark eyes on Damaris, with the flattering expectation of sympathy that was half his popularity. To his surprise, a wave of colour swept over her pale face and she turned away.

Annette concluded that her hostess was "gone" on the Irishman, and rather pitied her as being too passée to attract him.

"You must look after your little flock in person," Damaris replied after a pause. "My time is too fully occupied when I am in London to admit of this sort of thing."

She glanced at Lota, over whose chair he was now leaning, and there was significance in her words for many of the guests.

"Jealous cat!" Annette commented inwardly. Somehow, she never managed to play the leading rôle when Damaris Newall was present, though in general sufficiently sure of her attraction to have the air of a belle.

Bunny Weir giggled and demanded more tea. "That's off then," she nodded to Gerald. "I never go to a play, unless I have tickets given, but Damaris always has them for everything. That is one of the reasons for my sycophancy. Poor thing! *She* used to write dramatic criticisms, I expect. If I had to be bored by that, I should loathe even Eddy Payne."

"You *will* talk shop," Miss Newall said smiling. "And ours is such a poky, uninteresting little booth. We are the only people, who care to examine our wares. Miss Escott has a more wholesale trade and supplies the world. Will you be generous and consent to a *Vente au rabais* to-day? Tea in the orchard is so little to offer for a sonata on Straddy."

Her manner was once more the gracious manner that lifted her above the accusation of disdain for her fellows. She had a rare faculty for discerning the great and loveable; she was only scornful of mediocrity.

Madeline rose at once. "Come into the drawing-room then—or would you rather stay here and listen? If I leave the windows wide open you can hear beautifully.

Strad is exquisite in the distance. Mrs Graham must come with me and play too."

Gerald Muir watched the two vanish into the house with a discontented expression. "That fool of an Escott" was so fond of getting in the way and spoiling everything. He surveyed his boots gloomily and missed Damaris' smile of comprehension. She knew that he, at least, would not be wrought upon by the music, but, if he were crossed in his fancy, he would pursue it with ardour. Lota would have to suffer his escort on the ride home that night. As the first notes of the wild Hungarian melody floated out, her scheme faded into the background. She was essentially a creature of subtle emotion, profoundly moved by beauty in whatsoever form. But there was sadness in her thoughts, for she craved to possess the creator's genius, even as she looked at Lota's strength and envied it.

She had the fierce desire for admiration that not seldom is the fruit of tardily-acknowledged genius, she loved flattery of the subtle kind, and homage and tenderness. A wave of melancholy came with the sweet melody leaving her soul desolate. She had been endowed so capriciously that she obtained what she strove for, when the desire had grown weary with long delay. She had schooled her heart till it had become the slave of her intellect, but now it throbbed rebelliously and sought in vain to be released. The strain died away in sobbing, strangled notes.

Madeline paused for a moment, bow in hand, and then a jocund whirl of notes succeeded. Gerald Muir began

to tap his foot on the ground to the dancing measure, and Damaris laughed outright. She remembered that it was Madeline Escott, who had been in possession of her spirit, and that it had escaped. If the player had been more fitted for the part of captor would she ever have recovered it? She took an iron grip of her practical self and returned to her business in life. She saw that Lota yielded to importunity, and that her gaiety was less subdued than usual when the time of leave-taking came.

Bunny Weir wiled away the dinner-hour by a succession of piquant stories. She was invited as an antidote to the dark humours of Mrs Winter, who suffered from certain jealous infirmities of temper.

"The dashing Irish blood looked coaches and six at Mrs Graham," Bunny commented freely. "And so they really have intrigues in this old, old country town that is so primitive and savage, and yet produces such smart society. What of her husband?"

"'Something better than his dog,
A little lower than his horse.'"

Damaris spoke at random. She knew better Dr Graham's estimation of his wife.

Bunny shuddered sympathetically.

"Ah! How dreadful. I will *not* elope with that banana-like curate who called this afternoon. The seriousness of the step has come home to me. I felt sure that glorious dame had a history. Was she sold for a cow or a pound of flax?"

"This is Ulster. It is not the Ireland of Katharine Tynan," Damaris responded. "What sort of rubbish are you writing here? 'My soul come not into your secrets; mine honour be not united unto you.'"

"Don't quote that horrid Carlyle," Bunny said with a pout. "Yes, I'm one of his 'spotted fry,' but you needn't drive it in now. As if I ever aspired to be Damaris Newall!"

She looked up at her friend with the sincere, childlike adoration that touched the object with compunction. They were alone in the moonlit drawing-room; it was a time for confidences.

"Do you know how that hurts me?" Damaris said, with a break in her low, clear voice. "I feel that I have wronged you, Bunny, that I have come between you and a happier fate."

Tears rose in the limpid blue eyes and fell in the darkness.

"You have been the only person to care that I was saved from drudgery. How I admired you that day when you came into the awful, stuffy, unbearable typing-room, where I might have choked unseen till now if you hadn't seen that I was wretched and pitied me! It wasn't as though I had any claim on you—it was the sort of thing good, domesticated women with homes wouldn't dare to do but, because you thought and understood, you held out your hand. I know that I can't write decently but *I* gathered ideas while I was typing those interminable manuscripts at sixpence an hour, and I don't do much harm by my rubbish. No-

body takes it seriously. They know what they buy and are satisfied to have thrown money away. But with all the love and gratitude I bear you, there are times when I envy you so passionately, that I can't bear to see you."

There was revelation in the air. Bunny seldom discarded her light frivolity yet there were depths, which were stirred now to their uttermost. Damaris in her costly gown, her jewels and her thousand nameless powers to summon other natures—she stood for the ideal, which the girl had set up years ago, and knew to be unattainable. *She* was fair in the sunny typical English style, made for jests and perhaps for affection, but not for the passion of the intellect. She had realised her limitations after an attempt at mystery and aloofness. Nobody had sought to approach the shrine, hidden beneath her obvious cloak of reserve. She had sorrowingly accepted the inevitable and become "jolly little girl" to a score of admirers.

"I wonder why a woman *must* sigh for the wrong man," she said. "What a tangle the world is in nowadays. Marriage was simpler in my grandmother's time —it was a question of priority."

"You are too young to philosophise," Damaris answered. "On whom have you set your heart?" She asked the question jestingly, wishing to restore the situation. She disliked Bunny's occasional lapses into sentiment and discontent. She had honestly done her best, she told herself, to make happy one, who was by nature well qualified for happiness. It pleased her to

encourage the whimsical irresponsibility of this young gay-hearted treader of the primrose path of literature. There were enough bleeding footprints among the thorny growths, that led to the hilltops.

"You will laugh at me," said Bunny piteously. "He is ridiculously out of my reach. It is the first time I have aspired."

"Do I know him?" Damaris asked, bewildered.

"It was through you that I first saw him. I've blessed you for it and cursed you too. Can't you guess the man who is least likely to care for me? I don't suppose he ever thought of me except in connection with you. He's been kind to me because he wanted to please you. Oh! he would be courteous to a scullery wench, to Annette Escott, even. I've deceived myself sometimes when he has troubled to listen to my piffle and laughed at it. Why was I born a little fool?"

Damaris was roused to curiosity. "Tell me his name," she exclaimed impatiently. "Don't talk of him as if he were the one man in the world for everybody."

"Richard Carroll." Bunny said the words with a faint gasp at her own audacity. Damaris stared and laughed from sheer astonishment.

"Why, you deceived me completely. I thought of every titled slip of manhood either of us had chanced to meet in our glorious careers. I was afraid the great unknown was Another's."

"You are horribly unsympathetic," Bunny whimpered into a minute square of cambric. "I was sure that you would jeer at me."

"I am only jeering at your excess of modesty. Richard Carroll sets no high price upon his heart."

"He hasn't it. You have it and don't care in the least for the possession. Do you remember these lines, Damaris?—

> 'What hast *thou* to do
> With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
> A poor, tired wandering singer—singing through
> The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?
> The chrism is on thine head—on mine, the dew—
> And Death must dig the level where these agree.'"

Damaris said nothing. She had dared to tamper wantonly with more than one human destiny, and the consciousness of the cruelty of such endeavours silenced her. She had nothing wherewith to satisfy those who, having loved her well, gave her the need of confidence voluntarily. She had played for it often but accepted it unwillingly when it came unsought.

She had taken Bunny away from uncongenial work, that was fretting the slight, ease-loving nature; she had made of her a plaything, taking pains to banish all black and bitter memories that might spoil a charming *insouciance*. She had bid her victim amuse and be amused, ask little from men and be content with ephemeral passions. And now, in the shelter of twilight, this product of the age sobbed forth a confession of unworthiness that was no mere protestation but a cry of real despair.

CHAPTER XV

IT was one of the sultry summer days when the season in London is at its height, and every seat is taken at the theatre, should any star rise above the theatrical firmament.

Richard Carroll seldom allowed himself the luxury of a stall—he was a poor man and enjoyed pleasure in a humble guise. He formed one of a long queue that waited outside the Royalty, with the patience befitting those who make a point of never missing first-nights. A jostling line of men and women stretched far down the narrow, dingy street, enclosed by high buildings on both sides. It was an hour before the doors opened and various hawkers passed along the line, soliciting custom with cockney nonchalance. The fortunate possessors of camp-stools munched placidly and devoured light literature, the tired workers of the week shifted from foot to foot and yawned between their fitful exchange of repartee. A man with a dulcimer took up his station, opening by a few bars of some popular melody, then wandering into a tune of his own composition. Carroll was interested in the swift passage of the fingers up and down the keyboard, with their marvellous certainty of touch. He was one of the few to drop a coin into the man's hat.

Later on, when murmurs of impatience began to pass along the endless chain of theatre-goers, a shabby, jauntily dressed man began a kind of monodrama, in

which he imitated with varying success the famous actors of the day. There was the stamp of former culture in his voice and the pathos of descent clung about his well-brushed coat. Carroll sighed. He pitied the weak man with all the generosity of strength. The wretched stroller caught the unusual gleam of sympathy, and raised his hat in thanks for that rather than for the money he received with shame.

Two pretty shop-girls of the smart class were giggling at Carroll and making shy advances. They were surprised that a man of his undoubted claim to the rank of gentleman should stand in the line with humble pleasure-seekers. Richard did not notice their admiration; he was thinking of the old farm-house in County Antrim where Damaris Newall was spending days of pleasant idleness. He loved the sights and sounds of London, more alluring to the student of his fellows than any scene of solitary beauty but, for a moment, he felt a pang of regret that his lot was cast in the crowded spaces of a great city. He was glad that Damaris should not be wearied by the ceaseless stress of literary fame; she needed rest sorely during the conception of the book that was to outweigh the claims of all contemporaries. He liked to think of her as aloof from the sordid and commonplace, for a romantic background showed her to advantage. She had been a drudge in the old, old days when they were first acquainted; but he had almost forgotten that chrysalis state from which the brilliant genius had emerged.

A red-nosed old man of judicious aspect claimed

his attention to point out a phrase in the volume of Thackeray he was curiously scanning.

"They'll cut, of course. They'll cut, but there's no making real drama out of this fellow's long-winded prose. Give me Hotheller or Macbeth. There's acting for you. Ever seen Ellen Terry? This Frenchwoman won't hold a candle to her—a mere amatoor."

Richard had to submit to a tedious harangue on the idols of the public till the doors opened and a stampede ensued for the front places of the pit.

He found himself in the centre, well away from his garrulous companion, and at liberty to study the gorgeous drop-curtain. His fancy busied itself with conjectures as to what lay beyond its splendour—a beautiful woman, peevishly rating her dresser, a group of dirty scene-shifters, a bloated manager, hoarse with vituperation? He had never cared to penetrate the inner secrets of the stage. He opened a pocket-volume of Lamb's essays and became absorbed in the inimitable language of the writer for whom he felt most kinship. His taste leaned to the precious and the scholarly rather than to the learned and abstruse.

He was roused by the sounds of impatient applause that foretold the opening of the play. It was a first night, and "Becky" had been advertised with remarkable enterprise.

As the curtain rose, he lifted his glasses for the first glimpse of Madame Morel and suffered disappointment. An insignificant air, a rather monotonous voice—he had imagined her a woman of magnetic personality. The

costume sat on her badly, or the part was uncongenial. He was conscious of almost injury when the scene ended with Rawdon Crawley's acknowledgment of his wife.

After all, Damaris Newall was hardly fitted to judge of matters theatrical since she never to his knowledge sat out a play. She had invariably excused herself, when he had begged her to share some pleasure that he would have liked to make general.

There was a change in the actress when she appeared in the market-place of Brussels, coquetting with a throng of distinguished admirers. She had flung off the demure traits of the governess-dependent and her natural impudence asserted itself in the flirtation with George Osborn. Her smart bonnet and beribboned gown became her better than the cap and dressing-wrapper she had worn in the first scene. As the real woman showed beneath the sly affectation of virtue, a strong distaste grew in Carroll's mind. This actress was a bold soubrette, who would be more in place on the boards of a music-hall, where, doubtless, many a gilded youth would be fascinated by her charms. He followed the action with annoyance, deciding that the producer had taken liberties with the masterpiece of the fine old snob. The piece lacked unity and savour, deprived of the accompaniment of a matchless style of speech. Faint amusement at the vagaries of Lady O'Dowd left him a little tired of the whole play. Tongues were wagging on all sides. The general verdict was not a favourable one, and the Shakespearian devotee was holding forth to a

gaping audience on the absurdity of "making a play out of an old-fashioned, stilted novel."

But suddenly Madame Morel took up her rôle and showed herself the finished schemer, the weaver of a thousand intrigues, the woman, for whom men were ready to forswear love, honour, and the ties of dearest relationship. She stood forth alone among the feeble mannikins around her, at one moment clasping by the hand in genuine pity the foolish, besotted captain going to his destruction, at the next exulting horribly over the possession of a fortune in the event of her dull husband's death.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds!" It was not a great sum after all to compensate for honest Rawdon's loss. Two hundred and fifty pounds! For this money she would have bartered all the lives that had touched her, without a tear. She walked up and down, singing below her breath, intoxicated by the hope of advancement that seemed within her grasp. She stopped to wave adieu to the regiment, marching past her windows to the field of Waterloo, and resumed her reckoning with new exhilaration. Carroll gazed at her with eager attention, revolted, attracted, interested. Her previous failure was forgotten. She was Rebecca. She was magnificent.

He leaned forward with strained attention to catch a last glimpse of the valiant little adventuress left to her satisfied loneliness and fresh plans of conquest while her husband went out in his oldest uniform, with a muttered prayer for the wife he had adored.

Wild applause burst forth at the conclusion of the act,

applause in which Carroll joined. He was desirous of bestowing his meed of appreciation on a clever artist. The cruelty of the woman repelled him, but he was forced into admiration for her genius. He was anxious to watch the complete development of a baffling personality.

The next scene was laid in the drawing-room of that snug house in Curzon Street, where the Crawleys lived so easily on the substance of a confiding butler. Motherhood had not changed Rebecca. She was still untouched by pity for her victims. Amelia, her first friend, writhed under her false compassion, certain that her own woes would provide only food for mockery. The poor companion, whose money had been wheedled out of her for the furtherance of Becky's projects, fawned and fluttered round the triumphant Mrs Crawley. The Marquis of Steyne, himself a hardened libertine, was duped into the loan of a thousand pounds by a clever artifice. The scene was one of marvellous power. Becky coaxed and flattered and caressed. She paraded every charm before the leering, aged eyes; she humbled herself to the guise of a suppliant; she dazzled by her wit; she wept stormily and overcame. And for what this strain of the intellect, this exposure of vile instinct? For a sum of money that she might hoard in anticipation of the day when her deluded husband should tear off the last pitiful shroud that blinded him to the real character of fair, heartless Rebecca.

A burst of music, a wild peal of laughter marked the success of the passionate wiles that won over the Marquis. A note in the voice at its full range struck on Richard

Carroll horribly familiar. A torturing doubt had seized him, while he fixed his direct scrutiny on the white form of Rebecca, flaunting its conscious grace. A turn of the head, a dropping of the eyelids, a momentary droop of the head—he could blind himself no longer to the truth. That was Damaris Newall, tricked out cleverly enough to conceal her identity from casual scrutiny, but unmistakable to one who had made of her an absorbing study.

The shock of certainty reached him as she returned to bow her thanks for the approval of the public. Through his glass, Carroll could see the slight tremor that shook her delicate frame, the flush of excitement on her face, the half-cynical smile of pleasure.

The interval between the acts was long and sufficed to put an end to all doubt in Carroll's mind. Images of Damaris passed before him, while he reviewed their long familiarity. He had met her first in the company of the brother, who had proved so unworthy of her devotion. Hardy had been one of his fellow-clerks in the office, where he had studied law. He remembered the young girl, inspiring his interest by her ready tact in an awkward situation and her frank dependence on his chivalry. She was about eighteen, pretty in an undeveloped way, and full of zest for the world and the wares it had to offer. Sentiments had induced both to promote the acquaintance and they had begun to correspond. Their meetings had been rare in the five years that followed. Carroll heard, however, that Hardy's sister was greatly admired in the narrow provincial

circle where she moved and always thought of her as a creature of good fortune. He still kept a villainous little photograph of Damaris at twenty, smiling gaily without the shadow in her eyes, that later was to form one of her odd attractions.

Then Hardy absconded with his employer's money, and only a brief, cold note answered the letter he had written from his heart. He knew that she was a changed woman, and that joy had been banished from her life. She was too proud to be unscathed by the public disgrace and shame, but she never once alluded to her own sufferings in their subsequent intimacy. She had left the home, where Hardy's name was mentioned with bitterness, and was working in London to have a refuge for him, when Carroll saw her again. She looked older than her twenty-three years and there was weariness in her every tone and gesture. She was ill-fitted for struggling among those of coarse, strong fibre and sustained only by an iron will in her efforts for independence. "I never had a very large heart," she once said to Carroll in the outbursts of real feeling that broke sometimes through her natural reserve. "I have never loved many people at all. My love has always needed so much encouragement that those who have plenty didn't think it worth while. Now I have taken it away from father and mother and the others, and given it all to Hardy. He needs it, he will surely take it now."

Her devotion to the weak, charming elder brother had been fitful hitherto, but now it strengthened into the passion of a lonely woman. She worked for

Hardy, she dreamed of him, she sobbed over his cruel imprisonment, she allowed Carroll to be her friend, because to him she might talk freely of the nameless act that had fallen, disastrous in its gloom, over her youth and hopes. Carroll had seen the small dingy room she had tried to brighten for Hardy's reception ; he had helped to choose the flowers for the table. It was two years later that he learnt the results of that house-warming. Hardy had refused to come.

Damaris was all alone when she told him how her love had failed. "There is one thing left," she had said, looking round the cheap restaurant with a glance of disgust. "My head is full, if my heart is empty, and I mean it to conceal all deficiencies. I have learnt some lessons from actual experience, that most girls only read of in books. I am going to write those books. I shall be an egotist of course, but I shall not be a tiresome egotist. I shall be a personality."

She wrote to him from time to time and she sent him, at last, reviews and critiques on her work. That it was good work, he was certain ; but he never read it. She had begged him to wait till she had "really arrived" and he had been scrupulous in observing the request.

Carroll recalled these circumstances with difficulty. He had suffered them to be obscured by later events till resuscitation was necessary. He groped among the fragments trying to reconstruct Damaris Newall in harmony with this new conception.

Love had come to her in the zenith of her successful ambition. Her heart, so long closed, had opened with

the sudden splendour of a tropical flower. She was famous, still young, glorying in the powers she had developed at such cost. She told Carroll of it with an abandon that amazed him. She described Sir Roland Traherne and did not scruple to make of him her idol.

"I am twenty-eight. I have never lived till now. The strange delight of creation, Richard! I seem to have realised all happiness quite unexpectedly. I am satisfied with love itself—I don't need material tokens. Marriage is impossible as yet. I can't tell you the reason because you might misjudge. He is going to send me a package once a year 'to recall our birthday.' To recall our birthday! As if I should forget!"

Damaris had been beautiful as she spoke and the beauty returned when she revealed its origin. It was five years since she had shown him the faintly scented sheets of paper, the flower, the jewel that Traherne had sent. Five years! He knew the day the mail arrived. He always went then on an errand to Damaris. He had detected the curious perfume in the atmosphere but he had never seen again the fine, nervous handwriting of Damaris' lover. He had been puzzled by her chant, "Les cadets de Gascogne," missing the subtle thread of association that led her to repeat it on the anniversary of "our birthday." A dozen conjectures rose to his mind. She had been mocking him. She had often mocked him. He had known of her only what she chose should be known. There had been deceit even in her

confidences. Oh, God! what a cruel mark of favour those confidences had been to him!

The curtain rose on a scene, that was sufficiently dazzling to form a background for Becky at the supreme moment. She was brilliant with jewels and finery, she was rouged and décolletée; she acted now with a boldness that carried the audience away and brought them to her feet with the roué, who wrought her ruin. One trait of womanly feeling betrayed itself in the discovery by her outraged husband, but it passed with the unheeded cry for pardon that she uttered. She sat quite still during the stormy scene between lover and husband, neither protesting nor shedding tears, but with the dreary consciousness of failure drooping the eyelids that shame had never lowered. The paint and powder rendered her a ghastly object of humiliation. Her dress was torn, her diamonds stripped from her. In vain, the easily-moulded features tried to writhe into a smile, in vain, an effort at concealment bade her pull the torn robe about her. Her white arms clasped in mute despair, she sat amidst the desolation her own sin had brought, neither repentant, nor justly humbled—a motionless crowd gazed at the figure with the spell-bound wonder of a thousand eyes. A craving to pierce through the crafty brain and penetrate its inner secrets possessed many, who yet shrank from Rebecca unmasked. Was there some pang of grief beneath the satin folds that lay across the quiet breast, or was she a being of stone, who could not awake to a sense of her own infamy? They watched her from pit and gallery, from stalls and

circle—breathless silence continued. If one turned, he was drawn back to the stage again, and the last scene in the new drama.

A shudder passed over the woman's frame at last, relaxing the spell that held a multitude. A quiver in the upturned throat, a bowing of the golden head, and a single groan of anguish. The heavy curtain fell before the figure of Rebecca in her abandonment.

CHAPTER XVI

DAMARIS pushed aside the chess-board and went over to the window, where Mrs Winter was yawning over a novel, held wrong side up.

"I've been trying to work out that wretched problem Richard sent me, and I've decided that my heart is better than my head. I'll take pity on you, Isa dear, and descend to frivolous occupations."

"I'm glad you've given up that stupid game," Mrs Winter rejoined. "I can't bear to see you playing chess by yourself. It makes me think of Bastille prisoners."

"What an unusual flight of imagination for you, my friend! I am very far from being a prisoner. I am an independent working spinster with the world at my feet, if one may believe the 'Circular.' There's a glowing tribute to dear little Becky for you."

She tossed the newspaper over to the window and laughed.

"I wonder if Richard wrote it. Oh, yes! he was there and saw me. I knew it by the pricking of my thumbs. He never misses first-nights." She eyed Mrs Winter mischievously, prepared for a scolding.

"You have treated Mr Carroll rather badly, but you would never listen to me. I can't think why you love to have mysteries from all your friends."

"I must double my part. There isn't enough genius in an ordinary woman to keep *me* going, and people are

rarely able to appreciate two sides of someone else's nature. Having decided that Damaris Newall is a novelist, they expect her to be literary. It would disturb them to know that she was also dramatic, or musical, or artistic. I should be termed 'changeable' and the like. And it gives me such a variety of action. I can go down to my club and discuss copyrights. I can flit onwards to the actress' charity organisations, I can wind up at the private concert, given by distinguished amateurs. It's quaint how I humbug the latest thing in violinists or the last top-note in vocalists. They think I'm better than they are, whereas I hardly know one note from another. Is it humbug, or is it sympathy?"

"You have deceived your best friend," Mrs Winter said, with increased reproach. "After the trouble Mr Carroll has taken in looking after your affairs, you ought to be ashamed to trick him."

"Oh, Isa! don't take the affair 'au grand sérieux.' It's much too hot to be didactic. Richard will turn to some more reliable woman and I shall be left to make what terms I can with Timperley. My book will bring in a lot of money—I'm glad I went to Antrim for I struck a rich vein of heroines."

"You are too fond of money."

"That can never be. I am always chucking it light-heartedly away. Don't you like this frock? I pined for a Paquin for ten years at least, and now I'm really wearing one that Bunny Weir's countesses need not despise. Bunny's people are all so smart. They may be poor, but they are always presentable. The lady

in ' The Fortunes of Moira,' only had a pound a week, but she went to many dances and dinners and her gown was the making of her great match. Bunny is quite unscrupulous."

" She hasn't called lately. I thought she would have been bursting with congratulations."

" Not she ! She hates anything but musical comedies and Thackeray bores her to hysteria. I offered her a box, thinking she might invite Richard, but she said she was ' doing ' garden-parties for the War-Cry, and required her evenings for enjoyment. Good gracious ! Here is the rejected box-sharer. Stand by me, Isa—don't go ! "

Mrs Winter had glided through the door and taken refuge in her room. She was bitterly jealous of Damaris' " greatest friend." They had no points in common, she said, and it was better that they should not meet.

" I came to ask if you would come and have tea in Kensington Gardens ? " Carroll said after the first greeting. " It is grilling indoors, and it's a favourite resort of yours, or used to be."

" A wise proviso," she said, smiling. " Yet tea is still my stay and comfort and the ' magic shadow-show ' not less amusing. I'll get my hat and sunshade. I've been praying for hot weather ever since I bought the latter. It's a dream."

Carroll began to move the pieces on the chess-board with slow, methodical fingers. He was a brilliant chess-player and gave much time and thought to the pursuit. He had taught Damaris to play in the dark

year before Hardy came out of prison. She had wanted to learn her brother's favourite game, that she might wean him from more harmful pursuits. The ivory figures were beautifully carved and coloured; there was the fantasy of oriental taste about their grotesque shapes. "Traherne sent her these," Carroll said to himself, "or she bought them because they came from the East." He packed them away in the box and hid them from sight. At that moment, he hated to touch any memento of Damaris' lover.

She came down after a quarter of an hour, lauding her own punctuality. "We'll walk from here. It will prevent us from getting fat. How many years it is since we first drank a dish of tea under the dear old trees! I ought not to be wearing white, when I realise it."

A tall man started at the sound of her voice and raised his hat, looking full in her face. She ignored the salute and Carroll drew her attention to it. It was not like Damaris to cut anybody. Those, who once shared her friendship, seldom forfeited it.

"No! I didn't recognise anybody I knew. The sun is so strong, or, perhaps it's the stuff they put in my eyes at the theatre, that makes them unreliable. Poor dear young thing! How cruel of me! And he will think I am proud because I am wearing my first Paquin. It's 'the maddest, merriest time in all the glad New Year,' Richard, and you've never commented on my toilette. Are *your* eyes failing? They have the same sword-like appearance they were wont to have."

He made some jesting answer and was silent. To-day, there seemed to be a difficulty in approaching Damaris, and generally their thoughts expressed themselves with freedom. Absolute frankness had been the rule between them—except on personal topics; a discreet limitation. Damaris confessed to preferring men as companions, and in Carroll she had found one who never bored her. His voice was pleasant, his humour in accord with hers, his outlook on life original and healthy. She liked to discuss abstract questions, to battle over trifles, to joke about mutual acquaintances, and rarely, very rarely, to revive the past that had been common to them.

"That was your uncle, you bloated aristocrat," she said to him, as a white-haired old gentleman passed in a barouche. "He condescended to recognise you because you are in good society for once, not munching buns in a pit, with giddy shop-girls." She approached the subject with bravado. There was an expression on Richard's open face that betokened the forming of a resolution.

"You are mistaken. That was not my uncle," he said quietly. "Don't put any more of that stuff in your eyes, Damaris."

"But I must dazzle 'The House.' I must draw attention to my green-eyed charms. Didn't you think they looked rather well even from your humble coign of vantage?"

"It was—hateful. Damaris, why have you never told me of this life of yours? You have been on the stage before, of course."

"For several years. At Paris, Prague, St. Petersburg,

never in London till this year. Didn't you suspect when I went away 'for my health'—I, who am never ill? Where did you think I got the money for that—debt? It was two thousand pounds, and then there was the farm in Canada and the money for a fresh start after that failed."

"I thought you made enough by the sale of your books. They have all been successful."

"There have been many expenses, and I must save a little. If I *were* ill, how should I be maintained? I have no home to receive me."

"I am sorry that it has been necessary." Richard's voice was tender with compassion. She was so fragile, slight, and courageous in her dainty fripperies; she ought to be protected and shielded from possible horrors of loneliness and want. He thought of Traherne with fierce contempt.

"Well, tell me you appreciated my espiéglerie. I thirst for your opinion, knowing its accuracy. Didn't you rather admire Morel?"

"She was marvellous," he answered. "There are few women of such gifts." The old affection shone in his clear, steadfast eyes, the old caress was once more in his words.

Damaris flushed and a smile came to her lips that was very different from the mocking curl that did duty to the world. She had never liked Carroll so well as at this moment. He was a dear, generous man, he would be loyal under any circumstances. She held out her hand and he clasped it, conscious of its delicacy.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you a thousand times."

"When did you first discover your powers?" Carroll asked after a pause. The crowd in the Gardens was shifting and changing among the gaudy Japanese sunshades, the sun was hotter than ever and the glimpses of green trees a refreshment not to be despised.

"At Simla. I acted with Roland in 'Cyrano' at a Vice-regal function. They said the part of Roxane was ridiculous for me—all those Anglo-Indian belles—for I am not charming. 'C'est moralement que j'ai mes élégances.' Roland did not play the title-rôle—he was Christian, the handsome fool. You remember the balcony scene?

> "'Croyez que devers vous mon cœur ne fait qu'un cri,
> Et que si les baisers s'envoyaient par écrit,
> Madame, vous liriez ma lettre avec les lèvres.'"

"Yes, I read his letters 'avec les lèvres.' It's only once a year, Richard, not very much to live and work for, you may think, but it's the one romance of my struggle for existence, the one dream that makes day possible, the rose-coloured thread in the dingy web that I have to weave."

"Sir Roland is very handsome." Carroll's sympathy had vanished. He spoke in a hard manner.

"I have asked for beauty ever since I was born."

"He is well-bred, of high rank, and accustomed to command."

"I have the middle-class sentiment of reverence for my superiors."

"He is an acknowledged connoisseur de dames."

"The tribute paid to me by his love has been intoxicating as wine."

"He is lifted far above a commonplace wooing by his choice of communication."

"He does not cheapen his gifts by frequency. A woman at heart is furiously fond of an old-world secret understanding. The rose in the 'Prisoner of Zenda,' suggested the idea to us. He was foolish enough to exalt me to the rank of a queen and I—exulted in his folly."

She was leaning back in a wicker chair. The faint colour of emotion was on her cheeks, she looked young, and of a wonderful attraction. Her answers brought a cloud to Carroll's face again and something—not jealousy—saddened his expression. Damaris was watching the birds that hopped on the lawn with confiding little flutters. She noticed absently that one perched on Carroll's shoulder, but her thoughts were wandering in an Eastern garden, where she had awakened to a knowledge of the possibilities of a woman's happiness. There had been all kinds of gorgeous flowers and lamps and here and there clumps of trees. Under one of them she was standing with Sir Roland, brave and gallant in his uniform. "Was it the cleft in your chin or the cut of your coat that first made me think of you?" she was saying with the delightful sense of being understood in her inane remarks. And then Traherne had avowed his passionate love for her and —and she had quoted Cyrano's words.

" Un baiser, mais à tout prendre, qu'est-ce ?
Un serment fait d'un peu plus près, une promesse
Plus précise, un aveu qui veut se confirmer,
Un point rose, qu'on met sur l'i du verbe aimer,
C'est un secret qui prend la bouche pour oreille,
Un instant d'infini qui fait un bruit d'abeille
Une communion ayant un goût de fleur,
Une façon d'un peu se respirer le cœur,
Et d'un peu se goûter, au bord des lèvres, l'âme ! "

And it had really been the first time, though she was twenty-seven and would not have told another woman for worlds. He had been oddly pleased at her candid confession and she could never again repeat it, he had said laughing. " Un instant d'infini." Yes. She had snatched thus much from grudging Fortune with fierce pleasure. Nobody could take that from her, nor the sight of Roland's face, clear-cut, spiritual, lit up with adoration. How the other women had hated her, the women who had said that she could not act Roxane ! It had been a double triumph that evening. Simla had been *grovelling* after the Vice-regal banquet. She had learnt what it was to be envied, she, who had trudged through the streets of London, laden with heavy parcels and worn with a day's hard toil. Would Roland have lifted her into his carriage, and borne her along in the procession of wealth and vanity, dressed in her shabby, pathetically tasteful clothes ? Perhaps not. He liked splendour and all that befitted his royal bearing. He would have disliked the courtiers' tittle-tattle, had he been Cophetua. And she should have hated to go to him without a proper trousseau. It would have hurt her self-respect. When they had made much of her,

the Vice-regal staff and their following, she had been pleased for Roland's sake, that her wit raised her to his level.

Carroll broke in at last on her thoughts with unusual discourtesy.

"How long is this to go on, Damaris? The life is wearing you out and—the waiting."

She started at his voice and her colour deepened.

"I am not the sheltered woman of the chivalrous man's imagination. I don't think you need be afraid that this waiting will be too cruel for me. I am thirty-three and tough with the toughness of spinsterhood in the twentieth century."

"Yes, you are thirty-three. It is time that you had a home and rest. You are squandering life recklessly by this twofold exertion." He had marked her shadowed eyes and pulsing wrists with alarm. She was giving out vitality at a fatal strain; she was Damaris Newall by day writing, incessantly writing, going out to clubs and Bohemian gatherings, returning from the day's work to make ready for the rôle of 'Becky.' And the rehearsals and the necessary business worries! He groaned as he thought of the summer that was to have been a period of well-won idleness. She had left Antrim in June, and the novel was finished before she returned to London. He knew her precision of style, her insistence on the dramatic unity of her work, the elaborate revision that she deemed indispensable—she had secluded herself to bring this new book to perfection. It had been a blind, the whim which she professed to have of

"returning to the wild." He would not have taken The Homestead for her, if he had known its object. She must be protected from herself.

"It will not be very much longer now, Richard." She averted her face and gazed towards the rose-pink sky. "I have written to Roland for the first time. You know I did not think it honourable to write before when he was still engaged to his cousin, but he is free now. She was married to an aide-de-camp of General Notts a month ago. Gerald Muir told me and I wrote. He will come soon, I hope; he will see me in 'Becky.'"

She did not see the ghastly whiteness that showed through Richard Carroll's tanned skin; she was too absorbed in her own memories to notice that he never spoke during the long walk to her rooms.

CHAPTER XVII

THE house of M'Bride stood far out on the Killendall Road, " at the back of beyont," as Molly phrased it. She found no obstacles in dirt, or darkness or stretches of bog, and there were few days in winter or summer when she did not ride into Ballymore. Her younger sisters kept within the boundaries of the farm-yard, growing apace with a wild lawlessness that scandalised the matrons of the vicinity. Molly, indeed, had once been a slight restraint on their defiance of convention but her influence had waned since the day Andrew Millar asked her to be his wife. She was content to leave the brood to their own devices while she wandered with the happy-go-lucky student along the flower-decked lanes. There was the happy careless temperament of the Celt in her nature, that rendered her forgetful of all claims but one.

Lota Graham liked to ride out to the untidy, tumble-down farm, where she had a glimpse of the life that has no regrets. She envied the strong, jolly boys and girls on whom poverty and many kindred ills sat lightly. It was Bohemia, too, though a humbler corner of that joyous kingdom than Damaris Newall's abode.

She walked to Killendall one hot July afternoon, when the flax was being turned in the meadows and the farmers were already counting on a goodly harvest. She stopped now and then to look over the heavy stone-flanked Antrim gateways and the wide fields. It was

a long time since she had lived through a summer in the country—she had forgotten the names of many of the flowers. She wondered if England, her own country, were half so beautiful as this. The luxuriance of colour, the rich scents and the natural sounds that broke through solitude almost oppressed her. She was beginning to understand the strange charm Ireland holds, even for the alien.

Molly met her half-way up the long hill, dashing downwards on her bicycle. The furniture at the " back of beyont " was of the shabbiest and the frocks of its womenkind a derision, but there had always been money for bicycles and horses, clubs and county gatherings.

" What ho! You've come for tea at last," Molly shouted, springing to the ground. " I'll go on to Mrs Flynn's and get some strawberries for there's nothing in the house except the usual. Why did you walk ? "

Lota explained that she did not like the weight of her riding-habit in the July heat. She did not add that the fear of another rider beset her—a horseman who, too often found it in his way to ride along the four cross-roads, waiting for her to turn her horse's head from the Octagon House.

" That's a lovely muslin," Molly said, with her usual lavish praise. " How much did ye pay for it ? "

Lota laughed as she gave the desired information. It was not usual for Miss M'Bride to study economic problems—she was not fond of finery as a rule.

" That's a lot of money, but George is rich," Molly said, recognising, at once, that such elegance was beyond

her reach. "I've been making a frock," she confessed with an extra shade of red on her sunburnt face, "and I want to show it you; but don't tell the others girls. They'd make such fun of me. I should have finished it yesterday, but I couldn't find the needle and nobody would help me look for it; so I was cross and went out with Andrew instead. He fished in the river and Mr Muir lent me one of his rods, a real beauty. I like Mr Muir awfully. He isn't stuck-up and silly like the other Ross boys. Do you think he will leave Ballymore, now that Miss Newall has gone? He was always going to The Homestead."

Molly was not without the feminine quality of curiosity and sometimes dabbled in local gossip.

Lota's embarrassment escaped her notice. She was easily diverted from the subject in hand and reminded of her errand to the Flynns.

"Go right on through the broken gate and you'll find some of them," she urged hospitably. "It won't take me ten minutes to get there and back."

Lota was not sorry to have time to regain her composure, without the frank eye of a M'Bride upon her. She had been unreasonably annoyed to hear Damaris Newall's name linked with Gerald Muir's, and yet what cause had she for anger? No doubt, he admired a woman whose strange versatility in some measure matched her own temperament, whose knowledge of the world made her an appreciative companion in a dull circle of provincial convention. A vague uneasiness was upon her this afternoon—she had hoped to rid

herself of it amidst the cheerful household, where trouble was unknown. She avoided the houses of Ballymore matrons with the consciousness that they still looked upon her with distrust. She had met with more than one slight, that pride made it impossible to overlook. For George's sake, she had struggled hard to maintain her position as his wife with befitting dignity, but cold looks and malicious words left her longing for privacy. She sewed and read and drew, becoming more and more the prey to a sense of incongruity with her surroundings as the anniversary of her wedding-day drew near. Since Damaris Newall had gone, she had been hoping to see little of the man whose undeniable power rendered her life well-nigh intolerable.

"If I had never seen him, I should have grown to really like my husband," she said to herself with passionate vexation; "but he reminds me always of what I used to expect and the contrast is so hopeless."

"George's adoration seemed to stifle her when Gerald Muir's eyes were gleaming at her with their languorous brilliance from the silver frame in her drawing-room. She longed to tear up the photo but dare not do so, fearing the comment such an action would arouse. And she suffered her husband's caresses with fierce revolt letting her thoughts dwell on his foibles and follies till the disloyalty of her wifehood sickened her. She was neither light-minded nor ungrateful by nature. She tried honestly to fulfil the contract she had voluntarily made. The M'Bride's were old friends of the Grahams. It was chiefly for this reason that she had

begun to cultivate Molly's good-will. She had come to-day, hoping to hear praise of her husband that would make her forget a trick of manner that had irritated her unwarrantably.

Molly took her up the ricketty, uncarpented staircase to her bedroom and, locking the door against possible intruders, produced a shapeless garment of pink cotton, which inspired her with fresh disgust as she contemplated it.

"I know it isn't right. I can't possibly put it on for you to see because it looks *worse* when I try to wear it. Norah hasn't the ghost of an idea how to fit, or I might have told her I was making a dress. I hadn't nearly enough pins even though I poked about all the bedroom floors for hours, scraping them together. Whatever shall I do with it?"

Lota examined the wreck compassionately. "You've made both sleeves for one arm, and you've tacked the wrong seams together. Never mind! Give me the scissors and I'll soon make it right."

Molly hunted with helpless energy through the drawers, which contained her limited stock of linen, underneath the bed and on the top of the wardrobe, but emerged at length with empty hands.

"Jeanie must have come and bagged them," she said wrathfully. "She was cutting the creeper this morning or some such nonsense. She's certain to have left them in the garden."

"I'll take the dress home then and finish it," Lota said, smothering a laugh. She saw that fresh cotton

would have to be purchased to replace the mangled fabric, on which Molly had spent hours of fruitless travail.

Molly hugged her with tears in the pale blue eyes, that were her nearest claim to beauty.

"It *is* good of you. I do wish I were clever like you. I can't do anything but play games and ride and dance the jig. Everyone says that Andrew will rue the day." She stopped short and blushed furiously. "Och! I didn't mean to let it out. Father won't hear of our being engaged, but we do mean to get married some time. The Millars have money enough and I have ten shillings a week that my aunt left me. I wish I'd saved some of it but there's always been subscriptions and golf-clubs and food for the horses. George used to give me lots of things once. I don't like taking them now, he's married—it would seem like robbing you."

Lota winced at this crude statement of Molly's scruples. Had her husband really felt affection for homely, good-natured Molly M'Bride? The thought had occurred to her before, and she had dismissed it. Perhaps it would have been a happier choice for him. Molly's ignorance of matters domestic would have been compensated for, by her kindly nature and unfailing high spirits. She would have entered heartily into all his pursuits, for there was similarity of tastes between them. Neither would have "grated" on the other. She used Frances' hateful word purposely, formulating to herself the real barrier that held her apart from George Graham.

"I wish you every happiness, dear Molly." She threw

off her thoughts and talked of Molly's lover with the graceful assumption of interest that Ballymore disliked as false. She led the girl on to talk of Andrew and his splendid seat in the saddle and his bonny looks and his gaiety and pranks.

"They think I'm daft, Norah and Jinny and the rest for they've never been in love. But *you* can understand. Do you remember the first time I called on you? Oh! I shall have to see callers. It will be awful. I can't sit still, dressed up in grand clothes talking to all the old ladies about things I hate. I shall upset the teacups and say rude things when they talk scandal. Think of the Gillespies and the Macraes!"

Future ordeals loomed gigantic before Molly's innocent young eyes. She was only twenty and her acquaintance with society was limited to some dozen families, with half of whom she shunned companionship.

Andrew was to be a minister. She would be the minister's wife. Was it after all worth while, this stifling house-bounded existence after marriage? If she had married Dr Graham, when he had been inclined to offer courtship two years ago, she could have kept hunters then and "shown in Dublin." She suffered a brief pang of regret. Andrew returned to his rightful place in the world and she was glad that Lota had spoilt what once had been a rather dazzling prospect.

"You'll get on well enough when the time comes," Lota reassured her. "I had been a governess and knew less than you of housekeeping." It seemed long since she had been afraid of the cares of a châtelaine;

it would be impossible now to enter a room without noticing dust or disorder.

"Come down to tea," Molly said with a second kiss. She clung to Mrs Graham with the fondness of a simple nature, that worships beauty without recognising it. "We're having tea in the garden. I do pity you only possessing that scrubby bit of ground, that is right out in the street. You can't sit out of doors without the whole town coming to stare at you. The Octagon House is grand, but it must be rather like a cage, I always think. Right out on the bogs, one can run amuck."

"The Octagon House reminds me of a poem," a man's voice struck in. "Good-afternoon, Miss M'Bride. I was riding past and espied a table and tea-cups. Ah! strawberries! How very dangerous to leave them exposed to public view!" Gerald Muir was leading his horse to the stables, a small M'Bride on its back. He was quite at home in the shiftless household of his uncle's tenants, and he was welcome anywhere in Ballymore, in spite of the stories that gave a spice of danger to intercourse with him.

He lounged back presently and helped to bring out the chairs, with a jest for each member of the family. They were all comely from sheer health and happiness, but Lota sat among them like a queen. Her white dress became her full figure even better than her habit or the famous daffodil gown. She was flushed with the heat and more animated than usual. She dared chatter freely here of all that came into her mind, without fear of criticism or misunderstanding.

"Why does my house remind you of a poem?" she asked. "Is it the poem concerning 'The House that Jack Built?'"

He looked at her for a moment as if hesitating.

"Have you not read the 'Statue and the Bust?'" he asked at length.

"I have read it, but I don't understand your comparison," she answered, paling before the look in his eyes that told so much more than his words. Ah! he knew too well that it was safe to talk like this in a gathering of M'Brides, who never read a book of any kind, except under scholastic compulsion. They were noisy among themselves and the two guests had been placed side by side on the only sound chairs of the household.

> "Hair in heaps lay heavily
> Over a pale brow spirit-pure
> Carved like the heart of a coal-black tree,

Muir quoted the lines softly with a significance, that made her burn with shame and anger.

"You are romantic," she managed to speak coldly. "Better to stick to Kipling, isn't it? 'On the road to Mandalay' used to be your favourite ditty."

Muir laughed, flinging back his head in the gesture that had fascinated her.

"Good old R.K. 'A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar's a smoke.'" That was well said, wasn't it, Miss Norah? Have I your permission, ladies, or perhaps you will join me." He handed round a cigarette case and, after a slight hesitation, Norah and Jeanie each took a cigarette. They thought Molly foolish for

refusing so excellent a brand. Andrew was such a goose forbidding her to enjoy this pursuit. She had more than once set the farm on fire, smoking in bed after a grand hockey-match.

The whole scene was rendered distasteful to Lota by Mr Muir's presence. He was out of his element with these artless tomboys, in spite of his ease and their delight. She began to wonder how she might avoid his company. There was, apparently, no house he would not enter, sure of a welcome. She remembered the poem perfectly and its meaning. How dare he liken her to the faithless wife ?

Her bosom heaved stormily beneath the muslin robe. She tried to join in the lively chatter round the table and failed to utter more than a stupid joke or two. They were so young and contented, and she so old for twenty-five.

Molly slipped away, while the other girls were carrying cups and plates back to the house. She knew that Andrew would be waiting in the field for she could hear a faint whistle in the distance. She did not scruple to leave Lota now that the charming Mr Muir was there to entertain her.

Andrew greeted his lady-love with rather rustic awkwardness. He was a tall, thin lad, with a fair complexion and decided features, that would probably mature into hardness.

"I wish I could get through my exam. sooner," he said, as they walked up and down beneath the over-hanging hedge, that screened them from sight. "Five

years is such a precious long time. In England, a clergyman can be ordained sooner."

"But you wouldn't join the Episcopalian Church, Andy!" Molly had the true Ulster views of the "Established" religion of her country.

"No fear of that! But I wish I'd taken to farming. I hate study—it's such dull work. I shall try hard next term, though."

The cloud lifted from his brow as he felt the warm pressure of Molly's hand in his. He was really fond of honest, affectionate old Molly, who asked little and gave much. She was such a downright good sort, and would never be standoffish or sulky if a fellow did go in for a drop of whisky or a game at cards.

"That's right, Andy. It would be hard to disappoint your father and mother. They don't want *you* to dig and plough—they look forward to your being a gentleman."

The Millar family was of obscure origin, but having amassed considerable wealth, were ready to expend some fraction of it on the education of the eldest son. They were griping tradespeople with a strong bias towards aggrandisement, and Molly's modest income was a source of bickering among them. Andrew might have married wealth, perhaps, if he had waited till he gained his true position, though on the other hand there was always the danger that he might have fallen in love with a pretty girl, who had not a penny.

Molly's joy in her wooing was fortunately untarnished by the knowledge of these disputes. She gave little heed to such trifles as the opinions of parents. She had

always been her own father's idol and judged Andrew's in like manner.

"You'll not forget me while I'm away, Molly," the boy whispered. "You'll write to me as you promised."

"Faith! I will. I must get a bottle of ink, for ours is mostly dried up in an old jar. But I write so badly, Andrew. You'll be ashamed of my letters. D'ye mind if I get Mrs Graham to help me? She's always kind."

"I don't want you to see so much of her," Andrew said, sharp authority in his voice. "They're talking in the town about her and that fellow with the English accent. George made a fine mistake. He wanted to fly too high."

Molly's mouth quivered but she was too meek to utter a defence of her friend. She reverted instead to the topic of her own unworthiness.

"I'm not a bit pretty, and you'll meet lovely girls in Dublin. I do wish I were not so ugly. If I hadn't made faces so much when I was little!"

"You ought to take care of your skin," Andrew said, refraining unkindly from the flattery he knew she craved. "You must stop in and see to the house this winter instead of golfing. You'll have to change a lot of your ways now you're going to be a minister's wife."

Molly would have cried at Andrew's tone, had it not been for horrid recollections of brotherly remarks on her tear-stained countenance. She choked back her tears and tried to win back Andrew's favour by the wit that often succeeded despair. Somehow, the girl Andrew was disposed to honour with his suit did not seem so

attractive to him as usual. He had caught a brief glimpse of Mrs Graham in her dainty attire as he slunk through the farm-yard, and he had noticed for the first time that Molly was rather clumsy and did not know how to do her hair.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE sound of a scraping fiddle drew Molly away from her lover. Andrew did not go with her into the orchard, where the young M'Bride's had begun to beat out a merry jig, and Molly stole back alone, her heart still throbbing with the tenderness of farewell.

Andrew had not disdained to impress kisses on the wide red mouth, which had been a source of shame, for brothers of homespun wit likened it to a trap and made coarse queries as to its capacities. She was all gratitude to the boy, who alternately bullied and caressed her—the cheerful, ignorant nature was not of the calibre that demands homage. She was content to be what her forbears had been in times past, a chattel, a serving-maid, a wife subservient to a master. Yet the courtship was not without glamour to unromantic Molly or she would not have paused at the threshold of the farm with hot tears pouring out of her eyes and a deep sense of hitherto unknown beauty inspiring them. It was a scene to blend with her mood, while that was uplifted above the workaday world. On a wide open space in front of the house a man with a fiddle played a gay tune of the country, one of those half-plaintive strains of dance-music in which Ulster excels. The fiddle was worn and the player unskilled, but the sounds mingled sweetly enough with the voices of youth and the trip of light feet. Molly stood behind a tree, listening

dreamily. She would remember it long afterwards—her own dear, old home and the boys and girls, with whom she had made merry, all transfigured by moonlight and her bewitched imagination. It was like some novel, she thought crudely; she had read few novels, except sporting romances from the library of George Graham, which were too strongly flavoured with tobacco and wild adventure to have inspired her memory. Ah! Lota was still at Killendall Farm. She was dancing the jig with her hand in that of Gerald Muir, who acted the part of instructor. Their rhythmic motion made the other dancers look clumsy and rustic in comparison.

A vague fancy struck across Molly's brain, driving out her self-absorption. George Graham would not have footed it so gracefully with the tall, white-robed dame, who was not of such as inhabit Antrim farmhouses. *Had* his marriage been a mistake? Andrew's suggestion returned, bringing with it a sting that hurt her cruelly. Suppose, suppose Andrew should tire of her, and mate with one who matched him as those two dancers, paired in equality. She shuddered and advanced with sudden eagerness to the group round the fiddler.

"Och! thin, Miss Molly dear, and why aren't ye dancing?" the old man asked. He was a well-known character throughout the country-side, in great request at weddings and wakes. He was a favourite of Madeline Escott, and loud in his praise of her music and her generosity. He was going to her home that night for she gave him supper and a bed, whenever he chose to

come for it and she played to him on her Strad, an instrument for which he had a kind of pagan worship.

Molly joined in a square country dance with the abandon of health and energy. She had a capital swinging step and was complimented by Mr Muir on her excellence as a partner.

"One can really get hold of you," he said, "while Mrs Graham is a kind of gossamer wraith, who eludes one's grasp."

Lota was animatd and full of spirits. She delighted in a gathering of this kind, for movement was a pure joy to her, and she was reminded of the pleasant student-days, that had passed on the wings of revelry. She began to sing a German student-song and Gerald Muir joined in with a nod of recognition.

"So you know this fine old chorus. Where did you hear it?" he asked as they met in the dance.

"I was a student at Leipzig Conservatoire. I have sung at open-air dances many a time."

"Ah! I did not know you had been a student. I imagined you always sheltered and proud and apart from the crowd—a kind of queen but not queen of the jesters."

She laughed and thanked him ironically. She was glad to show him this other side to the character he professed to understand. To-night he should not dare to look at her with pity.

They had supper brought out to the orchard and drank milk and cider from mugs passed from hand to hand. The supply of crockery was limited and Lota was allotted a share of one which Gerald Muir took from

her to put to his own lips. The enchantment of the summer night had cast its spell about her; she would not leave the farm until the dance was over. It was ten o'clock when the fiddler trudged off amidst a chorus of regretful farewell. They had all clamoured for one more jig, declaring that it was a shame to stop while the moon made it as light as day.

"George promised to come for me. I can't think why he is not here," Lota said, as they stood on the steps, waving good-bye to old Paddy.

"Perhaps he's been fetched out to an accident," Molly suggested. "Anyway, it isn't late."

"I will drive you back," Gerald Muir said with the faintly triumphant look in his eyes that caused her to fear him. "Miss Molly has offered me the car and my own horse is here."

She had to consent with the best grace she could, but resentment against her husband stirred her as she bowed before the inevitable. Jeanie was coiling up the masses of hair, which had been loosened by the wild frolicsome speed of the dance and her fingers were not of the deftest. Lota had to submit to glances of admiration that brought back to her the lines Gerald Muir had dared to quote.

"Hair in heaps lay heavily
Over a pale-brow spirit pure."

She jerked herself free at last and went into the house for a wrap, while the horse was harnessed.

Muir helped her to mount rather carelessly, so that her white dress touched the wheel and was soiled. She

drew it closely about her and leaned out to say good-bye to the troop of M'Brides, who were speeding them on their way with characteristic heartiness and tumult.

"Are you cold?" Muir asked, observing the action. "There is a rug under the seat. I'll get it out if you'll take the reins." He put them into her hands and stooped to look beneath the cushions. "I must say that the M'B.'s have a way of doing things which is all their own," he ejaculated. "The wheel's not safe, tied together with string in a most villainous style. How they succeed in evading the jaws of death is wonderful!"

Lota was glad to hear the amused irritation of his tone. His touch on her hand as he resumed his seat startled her by the hot thrill, which was perceptible, even as she drew away. Gerald Muir was agitated from his usual insolent languor, he was catching his breath in quick throbs, that the silence of the night rendered audible.

He came nearer to her and she was compelled to look up at him by the force of his strong will, though she shrank in terror from the expression she read in his face and to her mind had sprung that instinct of repulsion on their first meeting when she had felt the call of spring. He bent down caressingly till his head was close to hers, letting the reins slip loosely over the horse.

"I want to tell you something, Lota," he whispered. "You needn't grudge me this one drive with you. I'm going away very soon—to India. Wish me god-speed."

The pleading in his words allayed her terror. It might be wretched vanity that misled her as to his meaning.

"I hope you will be very happy and successful," she answered. "We shall miss you very much at Ballymore."

"Will *you* miss me?" he asked sharply. "Tell me the truth."

"Yes. I shall miss you, and so will your uncle and Miss Escott and the Munroes."

He laughed scornfully. "My uncle will miss me! He is sending me away because I'm a discredit to the family. He wants to get rid of me so badly that he has moved heaven and earth to get me an appointment as far away as possible."

"Where are you going?" She was afraid of a pause.

"What does it matter? India is near enough or far enough, as you please. I shall not see Antrim again, that is certain. I don't think I've ever loved it so much as this past year. I was born here."

She had never suspected this vein of home-clinging in his light nature, but the truth of his pain was evident. The ties of country meant much to him, the ties of family still more. He was sprung from an ancient, conservative race, that had been loth to leave their native land, a race that had bred many idlers but few wanderers, who could turn their backs on scenes grown dear through long tradition.

A wave of compassion bore away Lota's prudence. This man was young, and his sins had been visited heavily on him; she could speak words of sympathy that might lift the darkness from his brow and restore the jaunty confidence of his spirit.

"You will marry some day and exile will then be

bearable." It was not what she had meant to say, but trite phrases of womanly guidance froze on her lips.

"Will it? You should know." A double meaning in his words silenced her.

He drew nearer and seized her hand before she realised the action.

"I shall be lonely but so will you, despite the happy ties of marriage. Why should we pretend any longer? We both hate convention. It may be the last time, Lota. I will say what is in my heart. You don't love George Graham—you hate his very touch. It is no true marriage that binds you by scruples of honour, which are foolish because they make a slave of you, of *you*, who were born for freedom, *you*, whose pride is even greater than mine. Leave it behind. Come with me to India: I will be faithful. Trust to me and you shall never rue it."

She tried to stay him but his vehemence overpowered her; she wrenched her hand from his grasp but he recovered it. Shame enveloped her as with a robe of flame. Intolerable was the insult to which he had exposed her.

"If you don't stop, I will jump out," she gasped.

He was raving now of his deep passion for her purity. Her purity! He spoke what had sullied it for ever. She had a sick longing to end her life there and then by a leap from the fast-moving vehicle. She beat off Gerald's arms with the exertion of her whole strength, she averted her face so that the glittering, evil eyes might not devour her beauty.

"Drive on—drive on! Give me the reins!" She urged the horse to a mad gallop, frenzied with the desire to escape. He tried to check the frightened animal but they were on the top of a steep hill and it was too late.

"We'll die together," Muir said with ghastly recklessness. "The way to destruction is ours to-night."

The mocking voice roused her to an effort at self-preservation. To die in *his* presence, with those words the last in her tortured ears! She made a desperate attempt to pull in the horse.

"He must have his fling too, you see," Muir said, folding his arms. He did not care, indeed, if they both met their fate that night when the moon shone glorious and the air was the sweet breath of beloved Antrim.

The car swayed from side to side as the horse tore down the hill. Lota still held the reins ready to avert catastrophe if possible, but the man beside her smiled at her endeavours and taunted her with their futility.

"It is quite useless, my splendid Amazon. I am sorry that the M'Brides will bewail the loss of their car to-morrow. It was an unlucky generosity on the part of the fair Molly. They will recover what remains of their own on the way to kirk."

With a bound Lota jumped from the vehicle out into the road. Muir leaned forward to hold her and the car was unbalanced by his movement. There was a crash, a jarring of wheels and the heavy thud of a falling body.

Gerald Muir lay face downward under the car and Lota was stunned from contact with a stone in the ditch, where she had thrown herself.

She sat up at length and rallied her scattered forces. What had happened? What was she doing on this deserted road, far from shelter? Was it a hideous nightmare or still more hideous reality?

She groped feebly in the ditch and recovered her hat. Some perversion of energy impelled her to seek for it before she proceeded to further action. Her white gown was wet with dew and stained with dust. She shook out its folds mechanically. Then she laughed at the silly attempt at decency. What was that mass in the road? A faint sound reached her, which seemed to come from beneath the broken car.

She walked fearfully to the scene of the accident and managed to pull Gerald's body away from the débris. It required almost superhuman efforts to free him, but her arms were strong and her will indomitable. Tears fell heavily on the white, set face, now scarred and bleeding from many wounds. She tried to staunch the blood with her dress but the dreadful stains made her faint with horror. He was dead. She was sure that life had left the well-knit frame and handsome features. The face was like a mask in its quiet impassivity. She thought it seemed to mock her fear and her fruitless efforts to restore animation.

It was long before she discovered that his heart beat faintly, longer still before the eyelids were raised and dropped again. She brought water from a pool and

bathed his head, she tried to recall all the methods she had learnt of restoring consciousness.

The moon faded and the stars dropped out of the sky. Should she be left with a corpse when morning dawned? Help must be gained from some source or her reason would fail her. Already the hours seemed eternity and her labours the last acts of existence. She was becoming cold and numb, and Gerald had sunk back into stupor with a groan of pain.

She cried aloud, but only the echo of her own voice answered her. The night was awful in its stillness. Every sound was fraught with ill-omen, every rustle in the hedge made her tremble.

They were within sight of Colonel Ross's house. Dare she arouse the inmates and summon help? She rose slowly to her feet and took a step forward down the silent road, then sank down by the burden she must watch.

A noise of wheels aroused her from despair. She shouted till the air rang again. She would implore aid, whoever it might prove to be. If she stayed alone with that grim form beside her, she should be driven to self-destruction.

A gig drew up and a well-known voice called to her. She saw that it was George, who pulled up near the broken car. He advanced quickly to her and then knelt down by Gerald Muir.

"Are *you* hurt?" The question had been a hurried one, that was satisfied by her denial.

"He is dead, isn't he?" she asked with a sob of

relief. The blessed sense of human presence restored her to sanity.

"Nonsense! He's rather badly cut about the head. How did it happen? Drove too loosely down the hill? Whose car is that? Well, the M'Brides won't get much wear out of it." He was attending to Muir with a capable energy that was soon successful.

"We must get him up into the gig and take him home. You'll have to help me to lift him."

Lota followed his instructions meekly, but she hated to touch Gerald Muir with the remembrance of his avowal hot within her. Between them, they raised him to the high seat of the gig and piled the cushions as a support.

"His head will drop. He can't keep upright like that for more than a moment. You must sit on that side and let him lean on your shoulder. Quite sure you're all right yourself? Very well. Get in and I'll drive rather more carefully than Muir seems to have done."

"Couldn't I drive?" She shrank from the ordeal of contact.

"You! Your hands are shaking and all your strength is drained out. Just sit still and adjust the weight as well as you can."

They set off and Lota's misery reached its height, during the slow progress towards Ballymore. How bitterly she felt the shame of her position, with the face of the traitor close to hers, bound up by her husband's fingers! She wished that she, too, had been injured. Death would have been welcome in any form rather than

this slow torture of living. She had to chafe the long, effeminate hands under George's direction. Her flesh revolted passionately at the smooth brown skin. Nothing could ever compensate for the dull, grinding agony of the hour, that chimed to completion as they reached the Octagon House.

CHAPTER XIX

THE lowering of a storm brooded over the country with such dark portents, as made George Graham urge on Diana to her utmost speed. He was on the Drumsheagh Road, where there was little shelter and he had an almost superstitious dislike of thunder. Though he had passed through all the dangers incidental to vigorous outdoor life, some nurse's story or perhaps some vein of ineradicable terror, transmitted through generations, always stirred within him at the shock of thunder peals.

He wondered with a pang of anxiety if his wife were safe, or if she had gone on some distant expedition. He felt that he should like her warm presence near him, that he might shelter her from the coming storm. Sometimes, it seemed that he could render few services to one so free and self-reliant. All his power was the rude power of bodily strength and hers was no drooping spirit to lean, where it might stand alone.

The problem of their relationship weighed upon him heavily. His heart had long been in her keeping, and he had been satisfied with very little in return. She seemed above mere earthly affections, passionless, proud and well-balanced of temperament. He was pleased with her graciousness, demanding no further recognition of the marital tie than she granted in the performance of wifely duties. But something fierce had risen within him that night on the Killendall Road,

when he had seen her face tragic with fear and pity as she bent over Muir. Had it been pity or some warmer feeling that had caused her agitation ?

George felt about in his slow-working brain for an answer to his questions. He saw again Lota's white, tense features as she laid Muir's head on her shoulder, he remembered her voice which betrayed shrinking and even horror. Would she have looked so at a man she did not love ?

George found no clue to the mystery that enveloped him. He had been wont to declare that he understood women, but a year of married life had taught him that to the character of one woman, at least, he had never penetrated. Once, he had been content to worship her blindly, without a desire to inquire into the reason for his worship. Now, he had witnessed what destroyed the old reverence in some degree, while it did not take away the love inspiring it. He loved her more, indeed, finding her a creature of like instincts as himself.

There was bitterness in the new knowledge that his wife shrank from him. He had always considered himself a decent fellow enough, with whom any woman might live happily. It was a shock to his vanity to realise that Lota only submitted to his touch, because she recognised the folly of life-long resistance. He had cursed Muir for coming between them, but he knew that to Muir he owed the pain of awakening only. Lota had never cared for him. She had probably struggled harder to follow the dictates of honour after she had been tempted to forsake it. George clenched his fist

as he thought of that temptation. He knew that Gerald Muir was famed for the light gaiety with which he won women's favour. He bit through his lip with his square white teeth, and smiled at the recollection of his revenge on his rival. He had taken Muir into his house, he had cared for him and cured him before sending him on his voyage to far-off India. Muir had not been able to restrain his abhorrence at the part he had perforce to play; he had begged many times to be carried to his uncle's house, even at the risk of death. The doctor had disposed of his remonstrances with ease. It had needed but a look of surprise, an explanation of the risk his patient would run, an emphatic remark on the value of his own reputation. Gerald Muir had writhed under the touch of his hands, feeling himself a captor.

There had been days of constraint succeeding Muir's departure, days on which neither husband nor wife could speak without fear of double meaning. Lota had become silent, unable to assume her usual interest in his proceedings and the doctor never questioned her as to her plans for the day, as had been customary. She had mentioned her acquaintance with Miss Newall, and she had spoken now and then of Gerald Muir, but she had not told him everything. His jealousy revolted from the thought that *he* had known neither of these so-called friends. It was impossible that life should go on in the old, careless way with this barrier of distrust rising higher between them, yet he would not let her leave him. She was his by every legal right and he would retain the claim to protect her by his name and position, even if

she hated that protection. There was both pride and domination in George's character, beneath the minor traits of vanity and snobbishness. He was determined to adhere to the pretence of domestic happiness, however dear it cost him.

The sky grew black and a distant peal of thunder sounded from the mountain-side. The silence was oppressive afterwards, and the hushed bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle had ominous echoes.

"It will kill a lot of beasts," the doctor reflected. Helplessness appealed to him in any form—he was eager to offer protection to anything of weaker mould.

He cast a scrutinising glance at the clouds and put Diana to full gallop. It meant a wetting certainly, and there was the danger of being felled by one of the great trees, under which he passed. He must push on to reach Ballymore, before the worst came. Jean would be dreading an accident. He was always in his sister's mind, though she shared his dwelling no longer. Poor little Jean! How proud of him she had been in his college days, how desirous of his happiness in married life! He remembered boyish tricks with regret. He might have made more of Jean and of Kate, who had not been shrewish before Calverley jilted her. Kate was having a hard time with that weak, fickle husband of hers. Kelly would lose his place in the Bank unless somebody interceded with the manager. George resolved to ask Dunbar to deal gently with his junior. Pat was a muddler and kept his tardy habits after many remonstrances, but he was straight enough.

Rain pelted down smartly on George's light coat, leaving him drenched to the skin. As the shower subsided the strange heat was renewed and darkness fell like eclipsing night. The doctor tingled with a presentiment of evil. If Lota had gone out on Chloe she must have lost control of the mare in one of these swift flashes of lightning, that left the sky so black. Lota had lost her nerve—she had never driven since the night of Muir's overthrow, confessing to her weakness. She was beginning to hate violent exercise, she said, and would much rather stay indoors in the sultry August weather. Probably it was foolish to imagine that she would face the elements to-day, when the bulk of Ballymore feminism would be concealed in cellars or convulsed in hysterics. There would be a goodly array of patients on his list to-morrow. George laughed jeeringly as he thought of the Dunbars, who had been brought up to imagine health a barbarous condition for a lady. He had not the faintest sympathy with imaginary ailments, for his work lay too much among children of the soil, whose ills have the essence of tragic reality.

A vivid gleam of lightning rove the sky in twain and Diana bolted. For a moment the contest between man and horse absorbed all the doctor's attention, but his muscles were of iron and he prevailed.

George surveyed his tattered gloves ruefully. They could not possibly be mended and he would have liked to see them in Lota's hands, while she plied her needle, dexterous in his service. She was a model helpmeet in her devotion to housewifely cares and even at Ballymore,

the stronghold of matron-critics, she had never incurred censure for laxity. The house was well-kept and dainty, the meals punctual and of irreproachable cookery, the linen in excellent repair. Jean said his wife had settled down better than anyone could have expected, and Kate attributed pride of gear to her sister-in-law as well as pride of place. Kate's tongue must have hurt Lota sometimes. She ought to match it with one that did not hesitate to return thrusts. Lota bore accusation and taunt gently; she never indulged in the petty recrimination which had once formed part of "women's natures" to her husband.

The air folded about the lane in dull waves of heat. A pause had fallen on nature and her ever-insistent melodies. An eerie expectancy lay over the country and the dumb figures dotted solitary-wise over its expanse.

The Ballymore road was reached as a Titanic blast from the heavens broke upon the occupant of the gig toiling over it. George shivered involuntarily as a flash of light zigzagged before his eyes. He had a sudden vision of an advancing figure and another, which followed at a rapid pace down the lonely road. It was still more dangerous on foot beneath the trees, that overhung the path, than it was on the open drive.

George touched Diana sharply with his whip. He was burning with a desire to reach home and dispel the forebodings that shook his courage. He wanted to find Lota at work in the pleasant drawing-room, that was

not kept for state occasions but served as her private sanctum. He wanted to touch her hand, to see the dark eyes and wonderful coronet of plaited hair. He would throw off his unworthy suspicions and kiss her on her broad brow. It was folly to let estrangement separate her from him when every fibre of his body ached for her in absence.

A man was hurrying towards the gig, with downcast head and collar pulled up to his ears, and close behind came a second with white face and disordered dress. George could not distinguish the features, though they were familiar. He was straining his eyes to catch the first glimpse of the roof of the Octagon House. Then as he drove swiftly onward another peal of thunder reverberated followed by a sharp report, which echoed a long time in his dulled ear. One of the men had reached the other and both lay prone across the path.

A sick revulsion from the merciless rapidity of death seized the doctor. He dismounted, half-wishing to defer the examination of those lifeless forms till he was within reach of help. The two men must have been struck down together, for they lay entwined, and one above clutched the right arm of the man beneath with rigid tenacity.

Compassion stirred George's heart as he approached them. The first was young, judging by his figure. George raised the head and turned it up to the sky. It stared at him with a glazed expression of demoniacal hatred. Pat Kelly had died, not in peace with his fellow men.

The blow of that discovery sent the doctor back to his gig in haste. He did not wait to examine the other man, who lay beneath his brother-in-law, but he buttoned into his coat a small pistol which he found on the blood-stained earth.

CHAPTER XX

THE day of the double funeral was long remembered at Ballymore. Two well-known inhabitants gone to their doom with that accompaniment of dread in the elements, that lends an added interest to tragedy—there had seldom been an event which excited so much general sympathy. Kate had the greater share of pity, perhaps, though she had never been popular among her townspeople. The child, which had been born on the day of the father's death, made the mere fact of motherhood pathetic.

"They say that Mrs Kelly saw her husband rush past the window that afternoon and knew what he was going to do," Mrs Murray said, in tones of awestruck solemnity, to the circle of gossips gathered in the little room above the shop, whence a view of closed shutters could be obtained. All the tradesmen had gone to follow the coffins to the grave and the air of the town was languid. Nobody stood about at the street corners, or hovered idly on the threshold of the post-office.

"Kate was spending the day at the Octagon House, wasn't she?" Mrs Gillespie asked with a doleful shake of her black bonnet. "George would take the news straight there, for he was the first to find the bodies."

"How awful!" gasped Lizzie Gillespie with a glint of excitement in her pale eyes. "He must have hated to tell his sister and with the pistol sticking out of his

coat-pocket all the time." This was a detail that the local press had seized with avidity.

"He didn't tell her. He called Lota out of the room and she guessed that something had happened." Madeline Escott broke off to shiver. She had been present all through that gruesome scene and had helped to lay the bereaved woman on the bed after the shrieking madness had worn her out. Kate had strong nerves, but she had been racked by suspense and the fear of Pat's wild revenge. Perhaps, too, she remembered the taunts she had flung at the incapable husband, who provided her with so little of the money she had grown to love.

"Was Mrs Graham much upset?" a voice asked curiously. "She looks so cold and takes things so quietly."

"She was horrified but she did her very best to keep the news from Kate and to soothe her when she found out. She had all the responsibility, for the doctor was like one beside himself. It had been such a shock, meeting the two men on that lonely road with the thunder-storm hiding their faces till everything was over. He kept saying that he might have stopped Pat, if he had had his wits about him, but he was thinking of something else and it was done before he recognised either. He thought at first they had been struck by lightning."

Madeline searched for a handkerchief, and subsided into it with a snuffle. Her features were already swollen and distorted with crying, for she was an emotional being and could sorrow with those that

sorrowed, if she had only seen them pass her in the street. She had never spoken to Pat Kelly or Mr Dunbar, but their fate touched one she loved with all her heart. She would have stayed on at the Octagon House during the days succeeding, if Lota had not gently dismissed her. Jean was there in attendance on Kate, and it troubled the doctor to admit any witness to the domestic tragedy.

"It is just as well George didn't stop Pat Kelly from shooting himself," Annette said coolly, "for of course he would have been hanged."

Mrs Murray shrieked. It seemed dreadful to put into bald phraseology the end that was usually reserved for newspaper monstrosities, in connection with one who had been an acquaintance of the entire company.

"The poor little baby!" she said with real pity in her tones, for she was the mother of a numerous family. "To think it will live to hear its father called a murderer."

"Oh! Kate says she shall teach it that its father did what was right in avenging the slights he had received. I suppose Mr Dunbar was really cruel and made Pat work himself up to frenzy. He threatened dismissal and hinted that there was money gone. The other clerks heard high words between them many a time. It's hard on Mrs Dunbar too, so high as she held her head, and both the daughters. I saw them pass not an hour ago."

"It would have looked better to stay at home under the circumstances," Annette said, arranging her veil

before the great gilded mirror over the mantel-piece. She was getting tired of the oft-repeated details of the storm and its dark influence on human destiny. She had read of much more exciting crimes in the newspapers and thought Ballymore made too much of its recent importance. There had only been a short paragraph on the "Antrim Tragedy" in the *Daily Telegraph* she had received from England. The Dunbars had been on the verge of a great garden-party, which would now be impossible. Annette had bought a new hat for that garden-party, by means of which she intended to achieve the final conquest of the Rev. William O'Hara. She recognised that there would be scant opportunity of meeting that cleric, now that the summer festivities were clouded. She felt angry and out of humour with everybody in the dull, provincial town she scorned. Had she been in Lota's place, the notoriety would have added a thrill of excitement to the sombre days. She lifted her head suddenly and smiled a malicious little smile. She had the means of diverting the public gossip into another channel, if she dared to use it. Dared? It was only right that the secret should be blazoned abroad, so that all honest women might be properly shocked. She was not going to be afraid of Madeline's anger, for in this case she was sure of the opinion of society being on her side, as it seldom was in their frequent quarrels.

"The hearses were both covered with flowers, and I think I never saw so many carriages. It *must* have been awkward, Miss Annette, for the two parties to

meet in the churchyard. Quite a lot of the Dunbars turned up from all parts and the choir was there and the Sunday-school. Mr Dunbar did good in that way, at least. The doctor was the only one of the Grahams who went, and Kelly's parents being dead, there seemed to be few to follow him. Mr Murray says that Dr Graham looked terrible—as white as ashes and drawn and old. He was shocked at the change."

"Perhaps there has been more than his brother-in-law's death to trouble him," Annette said, opening her thin lips with particularly clear utterance. The other women looked at her, as she wanted them to look. They had just finished a substantial tea and felt that a change in the topic of discussion would be palateable. The summer evening caused it to seem oddly incongruous to talk of death and its accompaniments. The storm had cleared the air and restored the sanity of sunshine. Had Patrick Kelly nursed his resentment a day longer, it must have been scattered by the brilliant beauty of the countryside.

"Ah! The anxiety was very great and the money worries too. He had to keep Kate and pay a lot of Kelly's debts," Mrs Murray said, beginning to knit a child's sock. She had indulged enough in the luxury of idle lamentation.

"The marriage was a mistake and I always said so," the youngest Miss Gillespie volunteered. It had been rumoured that she had fought in rivalry with Kate and been entirely routed.

"What of his own marriage?" Annette asked in a

voice of significance. "Can one pretend that it has been a success?"

"It was rather foolish to marry out of the town," Mrs Murray said, still unroused to curiosity; "but they seem to get on well enough. George never says a word against his wife and he is intimate with Mr Murray."

Annette laughed outright and succeeded in making an impression on the group of women, who had all contracted their faces with doleful lines proper to the day.

"George is only too anxious to appear happy," she said. "There are some blows for which men don't expect sympathy."

"Has he lost money in the ring?" Mrs Murray asked, letting her needles pause.

"I don't think he would mind that very much in comparison. He is proud and values his honour more than money. Mrs Graham might be angry at losing what she tried so hard to gain, but I don't think she could complain now." Annette was driven by the stupidity of her audience to plainer speech than she intended.

"She doesn't look as if she cared for anything, poor darling," Madeline said with an irrepressible sob. "She tries to be cheerful for his sake, but she sits with a dreary sort of pain in her eyes when he is out. She feels that she drove Kate into the marriage, I know."

"I'm glad she has *some* feeling of remorse," Annette said with a vindictive snap. "To think that you had been wearing your husband's heart out so that this

misfortune was too much for him! I believe it is a good thing for her that George is so cut up about this. He wouldn't stand *anything*—and really that last affair on the Killendall Road!"

"What do you mean?" Miss Gillespie asked, leaning forward eagerly. "I've often thought there was something queer about Mrs George. She never seems to care to go out to see people except to that farmhouse, where the lady writer lived."

"She went there often enough," Mrs Murray said. "I often used to wonder why they were so friendly. That Miss Newall was a regular Londoner, smoked cigarettes, and kept all kinds of hours. Her companion was more of a lady—she dressed like anybody else and condescended to speak to those she met."

"Miss Newall was a convenient friend," Annette said, choosing her words. "She knew very few people and those quite above scandal. In any case, the Rosses wouldn't like to give their nephew away."

"Mr Muir! You don't mean to say that there was anything between him and that stranger. She must have been ten years older."

Annette despised their dulness, though it prolonged a colloquy she enjoyed. She did not intend to reveal the whole story at once as she might in another circle. She looked down on the Murrays and the Gillespies too much to be generous in giving them information.

"Miss Newall didn't ride with him. Miss Newall scarcely knew that he was in her house when he came. She left them together for hours—no wonder they found

The Homestead a pleasant resort. Mrs Graham has lived in her habit this summer. It suits her and so does the air of Drumsheagh. Of course, when Miss Newall went, she had to choose a different direction."

A flood of revelation had begun to pass over the other women's minds. They understood whither Annette's hints had tended. This subject was far more absorbing now than the funeral.

"George Graham has had more than one shock lately," Annette pursued, "and I for one don't think the last as bad as the first."

"Isn't Mrs Graham a nice woman?" Mrs Gillespie enquired rather nervously. She was burning to hear more, but there were three of her unmarried daughters present and the youngest was barely thirty-five.

"She's a kind of adventuress, I believe," Mrs Murray exclaimed. She read many novels over her parlour fire on winter evenings, and was of a credulous nature, that inclined her to believe all the evil she heard of her neighbours. Lizzie Gillespie flushed with the expectation of thrilling stories about the beautiful Mrs Graham, whose appearance had always held for her a certain fascination, born of the idea that it was impossible for such striking good looks to be compatible with virtue.

"She is one of the dearest people I've ever met," Madeline said with indignant accent. "Why do you talk in this silly way, Annette? What sort of shock has Dr Graham ever had before this week, I should like to know."

"Only the slight one of finding his wife out on the

Killendall Road at midnight with Gerald Muir. I don't suppose that it would have been the surprise to most men that it was to him. But George Graham has been a fool all along about his wife." Annette's exasperation made her voice sharp and loud. There was no mistake as to the meaning of her words. Consternation deprived all her hearers of speech.

Mrs Murray got up with crimson face and shut the door, after first looking down the narrow passage outside.

"My maid is not to be trusted," she explained; "she often listens. And one ought to be careful for the doctor's sake. It will be terrible news to Mr Murray. Are you *sure*, Miss Annette?"

"Absolutely," that young lady replied. "I could prove it any time. Mr Muir was taken to the Octagon House, rather badly hurt, and didn't leave there for a week. George Graham has a violent temper when it's up."

"Well, I never should have believed it of her," Mrs Murray said, wondering how soon she could impart the scandal to her spouse. "To be sure, she has fought very shy of our company ever since she came home. George was very proud of her that day when they first came to church together and we all thought how pretty she was. She has taking ways when she likes, I will say."

"Very taking—especially to gentlemen," Mrs Gillespie agreed. She had never forgiven a slight, due to Lota's ignorance of country-town etiquette, that had omitted her on the occasion of a card-party at the Octagon House. "She was hand and glove with Mr Crawford from the

first, and you never see her in any public place without a group of men round her and she amusing them all. George has been blind."

"He has suffered for his blindness," Annette rejoined, putting on her gloves. "Of course, we can't do anything, out of mercy to him. If he chooses to hush the matter up, the only course is to pretend not to know what happened that night."

"But Mrs Macrae——"

"Mrs Macrae has no reason to interfere for Mrs Graham is an Episcopalian and the rector's wife would condone any kind of behaviour in the higher circles of Ballymore. I know *my* mother wouldn't have visited her."

"Indeed she would. *I* am proud to know Mrs Graham," Madeline said, also rising. "I forbid that story to be repeated, and I shall go to my friend to hear the truth from her own lips."

"Oh! I've no doubt she can throw sand in *your* eyes," the younger sister said, shaking hands with her hostess. "If she had committed any sin you'd forgive her, because she can play accompaniments. Good-bye, Miss Fanny."

CHAPTER XXI

"THAT is all I wanted to say," Miss Jean said in a quavering voice. "You will do your best, I am sure, though it's a great deal for me to ask. Perhaps you may be glad to have had the power. One never knows. When Patrick Kelly was brought home dead, there were many things that Kate repented. She might have controlled the boy if she had understood him better."

The drawing-room of the Octagon House looked very cosy to the nurse's tired eyes, far more homelike than it had ever been during her régime. There were some Indian ornaments and several new pictures and photographs. One photograph was missing that had been wont to ornament her table. Lota certainly had the knack of arranging her materials to the best advantage. The furniture was the same, but its ugliness was covered with carelessly-draped bits of needlework and soft rich-hued cushions. An order to Liberty's had done wonders at a small cost.

Miss Jean's face worked nervously and her hand shook. She had heard for the first time the true story of her brother's courtship and marriage as the two women sat together in a closer intimacy, than had been possible till a common trouble united them. Jean was going back to the house where Kate had already been removed with her baby. She was dressed in her uniform all ready for departure. She had only intended to say a

few words of warning to her brother's wife, but she had received, in return, a confidence that she had never hoped for.

She felt real compassion for Lota, driven into a false environment through a moment's thoughtlessness. Lota had a shaken, frightened aspect, that her black clothes seemed to intensify. Her vitality had waned, and her strong self-reliance. She was painfully relieved to have given utterance to some of the locked-up misery, that had separated her from youth for ever.

" It seems as though there might have been some other way out," Miss Jean said, revolving the situation placed before her. " Could you not have sought the protection of your friends ? My brother would have done his best to put you in communication with them. He was not in love with you at that time, from what you say."

Lota winced. She had glozed over any personal feeling on George's part from a wish to show him in as heroic a light as possible, but she knew that more than easy admiration had induced his arguments in favour of instant marriage. He would not have assumed the guidance of her affairs so eagerly, unless he had felt more than friendly interest in her fate.

" Perhaps I misled you on that point," she said. " I believe George did care. One might have done a thousand things," she went on hurriedly. " It is easy to map out courses of action afterwards. I had been insulted cruelly ! If one were provided with foreknowledge of all the strange happenings that befall us, how safe life would be ! I have always been the sport of the Fates

from my cradle. I have never known the quiet uneventful existence of so many girls, who are never tempted. That must be my excuse."

Miss Jean thought of her own monotonous round of duties, that had never been enlivened by adventure. She acknowledged meekly that her own temptations had been few, but there had been a time when her soul cried out for a *chance* of wifehood as this girl's cried for release from it. She had never known the snares that lie in wait for beauty, yet she had striven in long travail with the insidious dangers that beset those, who have little and desire much.

"I will do what I can to persuade George to give up this race," Lota said after a pause; "only you see how unlikely it is that I should have much influence over my—husband."

There arose in her at that moment a keen desire to prove that she had the power still to affect George Graham's actions. Somehow, she could not believe that he would disregard her first entreaties. She had too seldom been a suppliant to think seriously of failure. In spite of poverty and loneliness, she had been accustomed to an assured position among men and women, and few had ever refused to yield to her witchery, did she ask aught at their hands. She had slighted George by her coldness, perhaps, yet she did not think he would retaliate. There was a certain generosity about all his actions that prevented the fear of rebuff.

Miss Jean left her, confident of victory. She must mature her plans quickly, for the race was close at hand,

in which George meant to ride. It had astonished her that he should enter into his old pursuits again so quickly after Kelly's death, but she was beginning to realise the strange volatility of the Irish nature, that recovers from sorrow with marvellous elasticity. It was a gift that she envied, this rapid transition from gloom to merriment. Her own nature was too apt to grieve over past evils to the detriment of present happiness.

Mrs Kelly was a striking example of the national characteristic. She had been so passionate in her woe, that Lota had been stricken with compunction for having thought her hard, and now, only three weeks after the funeral, she was sincerely rejoicing in her new mourning and entering with zest into a scheme for redecorating rooms, brought forward by her favourite magazine. There seemed something uncanny to Lota in the recovery from genuine mourning within sight of the scene of tragedy. Kate, however, did not shun the Killendall Road as *she* did. She walked down it now every day and scraped clean from earth a rude, stone cross carved into the ground by her own hands on the very spot where Pat had fallen. She had spoken to Mrs Dunbar in her usual off-hand way, and was angry that her overtures were received but coldly.

"Sure *her* husband killed mine, if you talk of that," she said with resentment. "We're both left widows through no fault of our own. The woman seems to think *I've* done her an injury. She's more money than I have to be thankful for."

Lota was relieved by this practical view of the case,

but she still shrank from her sister-in-law. She had bidden her farewell with a pang of half-envy as she kissed the sleeping child in those maternal arms, and she was thankful that the baby's wail would no longer pierce the house with unfamiliar sound.

"Why haven't you a baby?" Kate had demanded with her peculiar directness. "George is fond of children and I believe you are."

She had no such plea to aid her in her appeal to her husband. She recognised that the tie between them was a frail one at the best. She had to depend on her woman's wit, her tact and—her beauty. She knew, without vanity, that the latter was the most powerful ally in any contest between them.

George would return for dinner at six. Let the meal be sufficiently tempting to soothe his tired body into pleasure. She went into the kitchen and saw that many dainties were provided, that she knew he liked. She had learnt his tastes, without effort, being observant by nature and swift to discern approval or displeasure.

She threw a glance of critical scrutiny at her own figure in the mirror of her wardrobe. The heavy black robe did not suit her, and she would not wear it to-night. She would put on the cream dress he admired and the great gold brooch he had given her. She twisted up her shining hair, smiling at the first attempt she had made to conciliate man and innocently proud of her guile. She had so little of the actress in her that she enjoyed the novelty of acting a part, in spite of the real gravity of the situation.

She met her husband in the hall, running down the shallow flight of steps when she heard his knock. She wanted to greet him on the threshold, knowing that he had missed the attention since she ceased to pay it. His face had always lighted up with smiling satisfaction when he came in tired and wet and found her ready to dispel his weariness. To-day, he raised his eyebrows slightly with a few muttered words of surprise. He looked worn and harassed and his clothes were spattered with mud. Lota stood beneath the lamp, wishing with all her heart that she had not changed her gown. She did not believe that he noticed now what she wore. His feelings had changed since the day they had consulted earnestly on the question of her "colour." A new fear chilled her as George strode off to change his wet suit. He might regard her request as an impertinence, now that he was indifferent to her wishes.

They sat down with the flower-decked table between them and the places empty which the two sisters had filled. Lota had arranged a tall rose vase so that it partially screened her from her vis-à-vis.

"So Jean and Kate have gone and the kiddy. I missed its howl when I came in, but I'd forgotten they were off to-day. Jolly little kipper, wasn't it?"

Lota made a constrained reply, trying to find courage to begin about the races. George eyed her in a gently ironic manner she had never seen before—or, was it her foolish imagination? She began to talk about the roses and their singular profusion. It was a barren topic and her husband let it languish into silence. She found

the silence unbearable—she had become unused to tête-à-tête meals. Jean had plenty to say in her capacity as nurse, though not to be depended on in a large company. At one time it had been George who found their dual solitude embarrassing and she had been clever in covering his awkwardness by her self-possession. Had Ballymore made her gauche, and unfitted to bridge gulfs of misunderstanding?

George did not seem disposed to relieve the tension of the meal by any conversation. He let her stumble and hesitate, when she, at last, found courage to approach the point.

"Going to enter for the races? Why, yes! Who told you anything about it?" His voice had a peremptory ring.

"Jean told me. She is in great distress, for she thinks it fearfully dangerous."

George laughed and lit a cigarette. The dessert was on the table and he felt distinctly better for his meal.

"Poor old Jeanie! She always did make a lot of nothing. Surely she hasn't upset *you* too." She thought she detected a faint sneer in his tone and she quivered with shame.

"Naturally I am anxious. Won't you give it up this time? I have felt nervous lately." She saw the weakness of the conclusion before she ended. George turned a swift gaze on her and continued to puff at his cigarette.

"I thought as much. You should go out and take exercise. It would make anyone nervous to mope about

the house all day in summer. You've not been used to it either. Take a ride or a drive now and then, and you'll laugh at Jean's tremors."

"Will you take me to the races?" she asked eagerly. "I should enjoy the change."

"I should prove a sorry cavalier after Gerald Muir." George's voice had lost its dry good humour. There was a savage light in his eye, that his wife had never seen before. She met it defiantly for a second and then drooped before it. George got up and stood in his favourite attitude by the fireplace. It was a pose that showed his fine proportions to advantage. The spur of rivalry had acted as a quickener to the personal vanity of which he had a goodly share. He was better groomed, better clad than he had ever been before.

Lota surveyed his broad back with a conviction of her own impotence. She saw that her husband could be inflexible where his pride was touched. He would carry out this rash act, in bravado to show that he lacked neither courage nor ingenuity. He meant her to suffer through her very indifference. It was a subtle revenge.

"You should remember that your sisters are dependent on you." She remembered, with renewed hope, that, as a brother, he had never failed.

George knocked the ash off his cigarette. "Jean is provided for and Kate will be able to make both ends meet, when the youngster is a bit older. She will find something to do. It's folly to talk in this funereal strain. I'm not a raw youngster in for his first steeplechase. I've ridden ever since I could sit upright in the

saddle and I've still to be worsted by a horse I've trained myself."

"But you have only just bought this one. If you were to ride Chloe or the other, I should not be so alarmed."

George laughed rather noisily. "My dear, would you have me a derision to men? A steeplechase jockey has no use for animals 'warranted quiet to drive or ride.' There will be some of the finest-bred racers in Ireland on the course. You should all be proud to see me take part in the great event."

Lota noticed with keen anxiety that he was more bronzed than usual by wind and weather, wirier in frame and with the tightened lines about the mouth that indicated hard training. He had reduced his weight and brought his muscles to the durability of iron.

"Why do you want to win this race so much?" she asked, trying to still her agitation.

"Eh? Because it's a bit of an honour among us sporting men, I suppose. You didn't think I cared much for honours?" A clouded expression darkened his blue eyes with an almost sinister effect. "You have your ambition—I, too, have mine."

"Do you taunt me with having married you as a means of promotion?" The blood had receded from cheeks and lips, leaving her ashen white.

"You know pretty well what I mean. Most women, however, see only what suits them. Put your own construction on my words." George flung aside a spoilt cigarette and took up a pipe from the rack. Outwardly,

he was exercising strong control over himself, but a kind of mad jealousy possessed him when his eye fell on his wife. She was afraid of his exposing her to the world, then. She had not been the pure-souled woman he had truly believed her to be. It had never entered his mind till to-day that the race would be anything more than a safe means of forgetting his late trouble. He had meant to ride brilliantly, cut a distinguished figure and compel his wife's admiration, but an insidious suggestion had come to him through her entreaties. He did not care, indeed, if his neck were broken, now that he knew Lota to be false.

"You are not given to 'double entendre,'" she said, trying to emulate his composure.

"I don't understand French," George laughed with grim satisfaction. "Well, you want to force my hand, so I'll tell you that I mean to ride next week—and win. One gets tired of perpetual misunderstanding. You have regretted the bargain you made a year ago—you shall have a chance of escape."

He set his jaw firmly, but the muscles worked in his throat with dreadful violence. He put the pipe between his teeth and bit the stem with an intensity that snapped the brittle substance. It fell with a clatter and Lota stooped to pick up the broken fragments in an impulse that bade her hide her face. She passed them to her husband, and he closed his hand on her wrist like a vice.

"Feel this! Such a grip could cling on to life pretty well, don't you think? if life were valuable."

She shrank away and turned to the door with a sudden

gesture of desperation. There was the same hunted terror in her eyes that George Graham had seen once before, when he had come to her rescue.

"It's too—horrible. Let me go. Who, in all the world, would mourn for me?"

"Sit down," he said. Shame of his own cowardice thickened his speech to roughness.

She turned to him with eager relief at the change in his attitude.

"Will you agree to give this up if I go away? You are a man and fill a useful place in the world. Why should you be sacrificed? It has been my fault all through." She went on quickly, seeing a sign of relenting on his face. She would leave the next day and he could bring Kate and her child to the Octagon House. Ballymore might gossip for a while, but she had never taken a hold on it. They would forget and, in time, her place would be filled.

George shrugged his shoulders and listened in silence. He was returning to his old belief in the simple nature, that did not wish to cloak failure from the sharp scrutiny of enemies. She really seemed to imagine that he would get rid of her without a pang. She had elementary ideas of the best way of solving matrimonial difficulties. One did not get on with one's husband and, being honest, one was sorry for him and willing to take the blame. One expressed regret and forthwith vacated the post of wife, leaving all things as before and not failing to provide a substitute.

"I shall certainly go unless you promise to withdraw

from the steeplechase," she concluded with the resolute pose of the head he admired.

"You will continue to stay here in your lawful position as my wife and the mistress of my house," he answered. "There is no question of either of us leaving Ballymore. You have had your chance of release, did you care to take it. I will scratch for the race."

CHAPTER XXII

LOTA had been unpacking some boxes in the dusty garret, driven by a wish to make a sketch of her nephew-in-law in his long white robes. She had found the box of colours at the bottom of an old wooden chest, where she kept articles, that were unlikely to be needed at Ballymore. There was a bundle of photographs, a pair of fencing rapiers, an old sword of her father's in its heavy sheath. She lifted them out with hasty fingers, not caring to evoke the memories that clung around them all. She had tried to keep the honour stainless, that he had bequeathed to her along with the rusty weapon, but an attempt had been made to mar that honour. She could not maintain her pride of race in the desolation that had fallen on her. His heart would have ached if he had known her loneliness, his anger would have scorched the man who dare treat his daughter lightly! A tear fell on the tasselled scabbard, as she put it reverently aside. She was trying hard to live up to the birthright of courage, which is but a barren inheritance, unless it be accompanied by gifts less stern. She must not weaken herself by futile regrets.

She saw the colour-box and groped to the bottom of the chest for it. A portfolio was lifted out first, with a scattering of loose sketches. She gathered them together, absently staring at the scene her brush had depicted—Versailles in the autumn with the glories of

its foliage, the Baroness' home on the Baltic, grey and stately and feudal, a beer-garden where she had often sat among the students to watch the cosmopolitan crowd. Little phases of life and friendship seemed to rise up before her with reproachful vision. Had she always to banish them to dreary oblivion? "Give us this wet afternoon as a tribute to our old kindliness," they said to her. "There is treason in such ruthless trampling of the past, and you cannot altogether escape from it. Maeterlinck forbids the philosophy of the present and future, he and many others whom you used to worship. You will grow coarse and dull and narrow like the women you see in this Irish country-town. They have not known better things—they but follow their instincts and the habits of their ancestors, whereas you——" A portrait of herself rose to the surface, a vivid picture of a young girl, smiling upon a party of hunters setting forth for the day's chase. A Russian artist had painted it, whiling away the hours of posture by stories of picturesque adventure in many lands. He had refused to ask her to marry him, because he was a poor man and could not offer her the state of a princess, the setting her beauty demanded. His homage had been a shade extravagant, in view of after events. She thrust away the sketch and placed the last in its case. Saint-Michel and a sunset reddening its ghastly stronghold, two figures on the wide sands, a fisherman and peasant girl. She paused to examine the painting with a start of astonishment. There was the touch of real genius in this last sketch, such as was lacking in the earlier

crude studies. It must have been born of her mood, the passionate yearning for the fulfilment of a love-dream. Slowly the thoughts came filtering back into her brain and the old restless craving for solitude. It was only a year ago, for the date was clearly signed across the paper under her name. Lota Wynne! She was not Lota Wynne and had not the same individuality.

She pushed the portfolio into the chest and locked it with the key she kept in her writing-desk. She would never open those receptacles for hidden memories again. She was beginning to realise the inner mysteries of wifehood. She was not going to follow in the steps of the biblical helpmeet, who had met with the briny fate she merited. She took up her needle-work and wrought at it with untiring zeal. The unceasing drizzle forbade any outdoor amusement. The bell rang with a nervous jangle through the quiet house and Biddy's curse ascended to the drawing-room, as that hand-maiden was torn from her ironing to answer its summons. Lota welcomed the relief to her solitude. She had received few callers since the funeral of Kate's husband, and had decided that Ballymore etiquette forbade visits to a household in mourning.

Madeline Escott waddled in, holding a very wet umbrella in her flabby grasp. She could seldom be persuaded to give up the custody of any personal property and Biddy had pleaded in vain for the preservation of the carpets.

"I hoped you would be at home to-day because it's so wet," Madeline began in her most doleful key.

"What a lovely bit of embroidery! May I look at it?"

She examined the strip of work with a shaking hand. Lota wondered what subject was so difficult to broach that Madeline was obliged to postpone it by methods she scorned.

"You do everything so well." The musician raised a tearful gaze to her hostess. "I hate to tell you about it," she murmured, rocking herself to and fro, "but I must. It would be wrong to leave you in ignorance when everyone else knows."

"What do you mean?" Lota asked quietly. They were standing side by side and her height dwarfed Madeline's figure grotesquely.

"You won't be angry," Madeline pleaded. "I don't believe a word of it. Always remember that."

"You are talking in riddles." Lota was becoming impatient. Her nerves had been rudely shaken by the strain of the past week. "We both hate deceit and pretences. Don't beat about the bush. Let me hear the worst."

Madeline's only answer was to burst into tears. She was thoroughly tired by her long walk in the rain, being quite unused to exertion; she was miserable and she was overwrought by the occasion of her visit. Lota tried to soothe her by caresses. She was really fond of Madeline Escott, in spite of many foibles that rendered the violinist a trying companion.

"Is it Annette?" she asked with a frown of indignation. She had long since discovered the suffering

that the younger sister could inflict by her wanton cruelty.

"Yes!—that is, No! I am a fool as she says." Madeline dabbed at her wet eyes with a hideous pink cotton handkerchief. She made a great effort to rally and, at last, attained sufficient composure to gasp out her errand.

"They are telling wicked stories in the town about you and Mr Muir. They say that you were going to run away with him one night; but your husband brought you back and fought with him. That is why they have been so unkind lately, ever since the funeral. They love scandal and backbiting and everything petty. Hardly a woman among them is fit to tie your shoes. Annette didn't mean to do harm, but she is jealous like a lot of the girls, who thought Dr Graham might have married them."

Madeline jerked out her sentences, as if some unseen force compelled her. She stopped to take Lota's hand and kiss it—the hand which she appreciated as an artist. Lota made no movement to withdraw it, but the kiss was hateful to her, after Madeline's revelation. The purport of many words and actions was made clear to her at last. She understood the general attitude of Ballymore towards her and her husband's opinion too.

Her head reared defiantly and her lips took the curve of scorn.

"It is slander and untruth," she commented. "Who has begun this report?" She knew that Gerald Muir would reveal nothing of his folly but would spread

abroad the story that Dr Graham and his wife had found him injured by a fall from his trap and had given him succour. He did not know how her husband had satisfied the M'Brides, when he restored their damaged property, but she was certain that the rumour had not originated with them.

"I don't know. Annette said something about a fiddler, who stopped with us that night, but I don't see what he should know about you. She was talking to him for a long time and made a fuss of him. Generally she doesn't like me to ask him to the Lodge because he isn't very clean."

Lota did not care to pursue the matter further. It did not matter how the story had been woven, after all. She was tired and her head ached. She longed for Madeline's departure.

"Thank you for having the courage to tell me," she said, holding out her hand. "So few women are kind enough to speak openly of aught that demands honesty."

Madeline was surprised to see how calmly she took it. She had expected anger or an indignant repudiation of the scandal. She strayed forth as soon as she realised her dismissal and wended her muddy way back to Annette.

One thought possessed Lota as she reviewed the situation. She could accept nothing further at the hands of a man, whom she had unwittingly disgraced, neither could she meet him again with this new knowledge within her. Her exhausted vitality must be spurred to

action. Flight would have to be swift or she might be overtaken by the fate of the coward, the fate of the Italian wife to whom Muir had compared her. She was unbalanced by the stirring of past thoughts and the review of her own life. She went from the room, bent on the accomplishment of her object, and only paused for a moment outside the surgery door. George might have returned from his round earlier than he was expected. She must listen and make sure. The precious moments were flying, but she could not brook the idea of delay. There was silence, broken only by the ticking of the hall clock. She had time to catch the train to Belfast, which would enable her to cross to England. Where should she take refuge? She thought of a remote convent Miss Newall had mentioned in the days of their first acquaintance. She knew the name of the village and the route to be taken from St Malo. She was bending her steps again to the place, where fate had overtaken her, for her mind refuted all the other havens where she might have anchored. She could not go to Frances and tell her wretched little story of married unhappiness. Her sister would not understand. She hated the thought of Paris, although she had many friends there; and Russia was too far away. She hardly knew her brothers, who had all married and settled in the colonies. They would receive her with astonished disapproval. Damaris Newall had vanished from the world of Ballymore, and would probably not return there. The secret of her abode would be safe—she need not fear pursuit.

Lota went up to her bedroom and packed a bag in haste, leaving behind all the trinkets and dresses George had bought her. She had just received a dividend of her own small income. She would only take that, and the jewellery she had been left by her mother. It would serve to keep her for some weeks at least, and she was too sick at heart to think of the future.

When the portmanteau was locked, she went downstairs and gave Biddy an order for dinner.

"I have to go away for a few days," she explained to that faithful retainer. "My sister is ill and I must go to her. You will be able to manage till my return. If I should have to stay for some time one of Dr Graham's sisters will help."

Biddy made a wry face. "Sure, I'll manage mesilf," she said briskly. "Is it a car ye'll want for the station and a bit of a basket for the train?"

Lota explained her arrangements carefully. She was going to Belfast and would take the night boat. The journey would be a long one and there was need of haste. She walked away to the stable, hoping the horses would give her the dumb, wistful farewell she craved. She laid her hand on Chloe's neck and a tear escaped from her. The beautiful creature seemed to regard her with pity and reproach in its liquid eyes.

"Say good-bye to your master, Chloe," she whispered. "Tell him I was sorry to go."

Chloe whinnied and rubbed her nose against the stall, asking to be led out for a scamper.

"Who will mount you next, I wonder?" Lota fed her with sugar and talked softly into the long ears. She hoped George would not sell the mare, but probably he would be quick to part with anything that reminded him of his wife.

Lota's leave-taking in the house was briefer. She imagined that Biddy suspected her of deceit and she shrank from the penetrating, grey eyes. She left a note on the surgery-table, where George would discover it at once. She suggested that he should account for her absence, at first, by the fictitious illness of Frances. So he might stem the tide of malicious gossip, that would spend itself on her flight.

She walked down the street with a backward glance at the many-gabled house in the market-square. She thought of Hawthorne's romance and the brother and sister, who shunned the terrible secret of their home in vain. A horseman was riding down the Drumsheagh Road, and her heart leaped with fear as she heard the hoofs ring in pursuit. It was Alan Crawford's voice, that rang in her ears.

"Good-day, Mrs Graham. Whither away, all alone? You walk too fast on such a day." He dismounted, and drawing the horse's bridle through his arm, escorted her to the station. The twinkling, roguish eyes seemed to penetrate her secret even as Biddy's had.

"Dear, dear! Your only sister very ill! And in London too! I wonder the doctor lets you travel so far alone. But it's the anniversary of the wedding or

thereabouts. George never told us the date. He was so confoundedly sly. An old married man isn't as jealous as a bridegroom."

He concluded with the boisterous laugh that had earned him a reputation for good-fellowship.

Lota coloured, miserably conscious of being at his mercy. She was sure that Alan Crawford had often joked of her intimacy with Muir, for there had been a levity about his manner lately, that he had been wont to discard in favour of more pleasing gallantry when she had enjoyed the friendship of his sister. She remembered that the last time she had visited Miss Crawford she had been rather coldly received and her call had never been returned.

At the station Mr Crawford was openly curious about her luggage.

"Only the bag! You're not taking much finery, then. Well, you won't need it in a sick-room."

He bought a bundle of magazines and a hamper of fine fruit and pressed them upon her. He stood by the train window to the last, talking gaily and greeting numerous acquaintances.

"Good-bye. I'll tell George you went off comfortably," he called in his ringing voice. "Poor fellow! He'll be a bachelor again, or a grass-widower." He wrung Lota's hand in his vigorous grasp and continued to stand on the platform, waving a jaunty adieu. It was too late to lean out and catch a last glimpse of the town, when he turned away to the bar.

The rain was falling drearily as it had fallen a year

ago. She leaned back and thought with an ache of longing of the protecting care she had rebelled against in that far-off time. She would have been so glad of it now—she could not bear the thought of the long journey alone.

CHAPTER XXIII

LOTA tossed on the velvet cushions of her tiny cabin, listening to the monotonous rush of water. She was being carried steadily onwards to the new life she had resolved to hew out of the solid rock of destiny with her own hands. She was sleepless and the night was wearisome. She wished that she had remained on deck to pace up and down alone, exposed to the comment of fellow-passengers, rather than endure this passive torment. The boat had left Southampton at ten o'clock and was not due in St Malo until six, at the earliest. She examined her watch to sink back on the pillow with despair. It was only palf-past eleven and by the regular beat of the waves she knew that they had not reached the open sea. She opened the port-hole that a breath of air might blow over her brow, which ached with the tumultuous procession of her thoughts. She might have found a refuge in Ireland, that would have saved her the horror of two sleepless nights in succession. The Irish Sea had been rough, and she had felt almost stifled in a saloon crowded with women and children, who groaned in unison. When she boarded the *Vera*, she hoped for comparative seclusion and comfort. But now loneliness hung gaunt above her with dark menacing arms, that threatened to shut out the brighter visions she was trying to evoke. The phantom seized and held her for a moment in an icy grip from which she struggled to escape in vain. She

lay shuddering with the desire for human touch, that becomes well-nigh unbearable when others sleep and there is no help at hand.

She half-rose in her berth with a determination to seek peace in the water, that cut her off from home and country, but she saw the stewardess outlined dimly substantial, against the passage leading to the deck, and the mere sight of the woman reassured her. A muffled cry of " Water " ascended from a lower cabin, and Lota was left alone. She turned on the light and reached down from the rack above the berth a magazine she had bought in the train. She turned over the leaves, trying to concentrate her attention on the flimsy storyettes it provided lavishly but the effort tired her brain yet more. One of these crude, sentimental sketches of life and love touched on Irish superstition and belief in the Mary-morgans, who meddle with the fate of men. It was erroneous in its statements, extravagant in its details, but there was an element of excitement in the narrative that caught Lota's attention. She read to the end and was not much surprised to see Bunny Weir's pen-name at the bottom of the last page. It was the kind of stuff which Miss Newall had warned her against reading. " Poured out by the gallon and as nauseating as the ink it consumes." Bunny had not been in the least afflicted by this drastic criticism. She had promptly asked Damaris for a new fountain pen and a pad of thick paper, and had set to work " to write round an old woman in utter destitution and a picturesque cottage, a rich nephew from the colonies with a

heart for aged relations, and a dashing but penniless baronet's daughter with blue eyes and a brogue."

"It must be easy enough," Lota reflected. "I wonder it I could get a hearing. I can't go back to governessing with no references."

The idea suggested a fresh train of thought. She felt under the pillow for her purse and examined the contents rather anxiously. She could manage to live at a cheap pension for a few months without the necessity for earning her bread, but sooner or later she would have to return to the labour-market, a damaged article. Perhaps she had already lost her few accomplishments, during the one year of wifehood. She had practised fairly often on her new Blüthner and she had laboured at embroidery of late, but no doubt her fluency in languages was gone. She might even more have acquired the dreadful Ulster accent that prevailed at Ballymore. She had certainly ceased to notice George's provincialisms.

She murmured to herself fragments of Heine and Schiller, Lamartine and De Musset, but at last one poem rose to the surface of her memories and refused to be obliterated.

> "The lost days of my life until to-day
> What were they, could I see them on the street
> Lie as they fell? Would they be ears of wheat
> Sown once for gold but trodden into clay:
> Or golden coins squandered and still to pay?"

Yes! Each one a murdered self, the Lota that might have been. Love cast aside with scorn, duty abandoned, honour mocked. The throb of the engines caused a

quicker pulsation of her heart. Whither was this boat carrying her? Though she fled from misery, she carried it with her locked up until the watches of the night brought it forth anew. There was no door anywhere that would open readily to her stranger knock.

Men's voices and loud laughter floated in from the smoke-room, and a clang of dishes resounded constantly from the saloon. There was a measured tramp of feet overhead and the call of an officer on deck. This one night was lengthening into an eternity. She would never rid herself from the iteration of those words.

> "I am thyself—what hast thou done to me?
> And I—and I—thyself, lo! each one saith,
> And thou thyself, to all eternity."

She caught sounds of heavy slumber on the other side of the partition. Of all the passengers, she was apparently the only one with unquiet conscience. The stewardess had returned to her station and was placidly crocheting. She looked in on Lota and nodded to her. "You all right?" she asked cheerfully, and Lota was constrained to lie. That honest round-faced woman would have little sympathy with her morbid imaginings. She was content to labour for her family and look forward to her brief sojourns in a stationary house, conscious in the storms of winter that in all likelihood her children would, one day, wait in the harbour for the news of her death.

Lota fixed her eyes on the fast-moving steel hook as it caught up the white loops of cotton and twisted them deftly into patterns. Gradually, she began to feel dazed

and, when mid-channel was reached and silence fell, she had sunk into quiet oblivion.

. . . . . .

Lota woke to see the sun streaming into the cabin, and the sea dancing placidly calm. She sprang from her berth and began to brush her thick hair with sudden zest for the dawn.

There were passengers on deck when she ascended, though it was only half-past five. Some were breakfasting heartily in the saloon, but others preferred the fresh breezes of morning, that was wonderfully cheering after hours spent in an atmosphere of disinfectant and engine-heat combined. An eager-faced American paused by Lota's side to watch for the French shore with open curiosity. A rowing-boat came alongside, manned by sailors in bright uniform, who shouted a lively salutation. There was a general bustle that betokened the completion of toilets and gathering together of baggage, during which even the victims of mal-de-mer revived.

A wide open quay was visible now, planted with rows of trees and diversified by open stalls, which were protected by striped awnings. Two *douaniers* were marching up and down in baggy blue trousers and red caps—they had a quaint, almost doll-like appearance in the distance.

The American began to laugh with pleasure. "Do see!" she cried to Lota. "Aren't they cunning? And *just* like the pictures in my book. Isn't it, darling, the walls and the rocks and everything?"

Above them towered the massy ramparts that had withstood many foes—built on a rock, the picturesque old town stood proudly conscious of its own strength, the parent of numberless brave sons. "Duguay—Trouin, Chateaubriand, the Duchess Anne." The American girl murmured the names ecstatically as she perused one of her many guide-books. She was anticipating a ghoul-like revel on the bones of ancient tradition.

Lota stepped on shore with a delightful sensation of freedom. The colour had returned to her lips, the strength to her frame. The past was blurring rapidly, while old days returned with the sound of the French tongue and the sight of dark foreign faces.

She reassured the *visiteur* more volubly than was necessary for the pleasure of using the liquid speech, to which her tongue had grown unaccustomed. A crowd of commissionaires, who had been importuning her with shrill chatter fell back a pace or two when they heard her correct accent. They sought for English ladies who might be bewildered into paying an excessive *pourboire*. Lota went about the business of money-changing easily—she had few difficulties in travelling alone, thanks to a cosmopolitan up-bringing. One or two timid girls admired her self-reliance with a pang of envy. There is a certain distinction about the woman, who wanders unprotected and seeks not to throw her burdens upon other shoulders, neither sinks wearily under their incubus.

A sturdy, bare-legged boy of twelve was engaged as

Lota's escort to an hotel. He shouldered the bag and preceded her up the narrow, unsavoury streets with the high buildings that tower on either side. The Place de Chateaubriand was deserted at this hour and a multitude of green chairs and tables gave it the appearance of an empty concert-hall. Lota sat down at one of the tables and ordered déjeuner, for she had eaten nothing on the boat. Three English ladies had followed her, school-mistresses evidently, out on a holiday. They were well equipped with cameras, bicycles, and the inevitable Baedeker; they regarded Lota and her modest hand-bag with puzzled scrutiny. She was playing a game of buoyant merriment with a tiny black kitten that had run out from the hotel. When they struggled to express their wants to the landlady, she, at once, appealed to Lota for translation.

"You are an American," one of the girls said, when the matter had been satisfactorily settled.

Lota smiled with some astonishment.

"Not at all. I'm quite English, though I travel alone and speak the language."

The girl stared. She was a sonsy, sunburnt lassie, whose attire bore witness to her love of national sport. "I beg your pardon," she murmured. "I noticed you on the boat with a girl who said 'I guess.'"

Lota chatted to them for a few minutes, then paid her modest account and sauntered off. She saw that the elders of the party rather disapproved of her. They were chaperoning two younger friends of more mature age than she. Where was her guardian? She could

not be really nice or she would not cross the Channel in that independent, free-and-easy style.

To the post-office first for letters. She had telegraphed to the Mother Superior of that convent and there might be a reply waiting even now.

The narrow street was crowded with people, trooping noisily to mass and the shutters of the shops were being removed. She bought some tempting fruit and smiled wickedly to think of Miss Jean's horror, could she have seen the transaction, for it was Sunday morning. A dismal little emporium labelled High-Life Tailor aroused her mirth afresh. The naïveté of these Bretons was so amusing after the stolid sense of the Ulster Scot. "Confections pour les hommes." George would have difficulty in fitting himself out at that establishment, his size not being what is known as "stock-size."

She banished her husband from her thoughts and entered the post-office. The employés were brusque and decided. There was no letter for Mlle Wynne. The next post from the country would arrive in two hours. Lota resolved to wait, a cloud obscuring her gaiety. If the sisters refused to admit her? She had so longed for the peace and seclusion of those convent walls.

She crossed to the cathedral and went softly past kneeling figures to a dimly lighted side-chapel, where she found a vacant chair. Music reverberated in the distances, the sweet, shrill voices of boy-choristers, and the solemn notes of a great organ. A priest chanted

a benediction and there was silence, broken only by subdued prayer.

Drowsiness assailed Lota till her head drooped forward. The glorious stained windows dazzled her tired eyes, the peasants who glided to and fro confused her mind. Her head bent lower and lower. The music died away, at length, and long peace followed.

A touch on her arm awakened her. An old priest was holding out a great salver, which contained silver and bronze coins. She fumbled in her purse to produce an offering, ashamed of her slumber within those holy walls. She was cramped and cold from her stooping attitude and her head ached.

Near her knelt a young man in the priestly cassock, of a fair, serious countenance and devout mien. He was muttering prayers in Latin and his eyes were intent on the crucifix before him, a foolish painted symbol of crude superstition to some, divinity personified to living faith and trust.

Ancient women in the stiff, high, fisher-coiffes were going reverently through the ceremonial observances of mass. Many were bent and crippled with rheumatism, but they did not scruple to kneel on the stone floor. Weather-beaten toilers of the sea were among them, prostrating themselves before the Mother, who brought the only glimpse of mercy into their hard lives.

A long, long way seemed Ballymore, and the droning voice of Macrae, and the confident, glib utterance of the Episcopalian church. Lota could listen to this service and not feel outcast—she belonged to the vast assembly

of worshippers, as long as she turned her heart where theirs were turned.

There were many greetings in the Cathedral Place when mass was over and a general gaiety began to pervade St Malo. Those who had come long distances to worship, met their town-friends and exchanged news. Others had made plans for pleasure-parties and Sabbath indulgence in good fare. They all seemed glad with one accord to be alive beneath the glowing summer sky. Winter would come and with it dark days of famine, storm, and peril; but they were children of the hour and their prayers had been heard.

Lota sought in vain the boyish priest, whose face had the purity and renunciation and selflessness. She did not find him among the crowd that was now crystallising into little groups up and down the Grande Rue. *He* would think time wasted that was spent in gossip and social intercourse.

There was no letter for Lota by the twelve o'clock post, and an ugly fear crept over her. She could not afford to live for any length of time at a pension, however moderate the cost, and there would be, too, the publicity she dreaded. "The only place I have known that was cheap and nice," Miss Newall had said of the convent, and twenty-five francs was marvellously little for a week's board. But she remembered a pretty resort outside St Malo that would not be filled by the phantoms of Dinard. A bulky steam-vehicle would convey her there in less than half an hour. She settled down on one of the wooden benches and watched the tide foam

on the rocks. It was a strange whim to revisit the scenes of her ill-starred courtship and perhaps a dangerous one, for she might meet Mme Bonnier or one of the old Parisian friends at any turn. White, shuttered houses with trim gardens, open-air cafés, baths, Casino, and an English church on the left with a glimpse of Mont. St. Michel on the right, and the glittering blue waters that surrounded the island-fortress.

Lota's search for a cheap pension was not encouraging. The bedrooms were hopelessly stuffy, the attendants were not clean, or the price was too high. She bent her steps at last to a cheerful, turreted hotel, painted white and hung with creepers. The propriétaire was urbane and courteous, could receive Mlle for one night and would do everything for her comfort. Lota decided to make this her abiding-place until she could reach Pernotel. A few francs more or less would not matter for one day.

The chambermaid ushered Lota to a cool, matted bedroom and brought her tea, *English* tea. It was a speciality of the hotel. She must sleep till dinner, for those dreadful steamers wore out all the Channel passengers and Mlle had been exposed to the heat of St Malo, which was of a frightful strength.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE most appetising of meals was served in the oddly-shaped salle-à-manger of the turreted hotel. Flowers decked the tables in profusion, the chef was a master of the culinary art and a flow of rippling merriment inspired the guests. Next to Lota sat a young Frenchman of some claim to wit, who started explosive laughter by his boyish sallies. He was accompanied by his father and mother, a little bourgeois in appearance, a little boisterous when the fun waxed furious, but redeemed by their radiant happiness and their mutual devotion. They were wealthy tradespeople, enjoying a well-earned holiday to the full as they ate their omnivorous way through the many courses. The son stole glances at Lota from time to time and was anxious to join forces with the beautiful stranger, who maintained her position with astonishing composure. But she was indeed distinguished, this plainly-dressed, tailor-built Englishwoman, and what magnificent eyes and hair! Lota found herself drawn into converastion rather against her first inclination, and soon her *bon mots* were bandied about the table amidst light-hearted applause.

The ladies flocked round her when they repaired to the gilded saloon for a few minutes, before seeking the Casino. Was she going to make a long visit? The life was delightful. Everyone lived out of doors and the bathing was of the best. They seemed genuinely

disappointed, when she spoke of her intention to spend only one night at the Hotel. She ought to stay if only for the picnic at Rotheneuf, where there were the most wonderful carved rocks. Lota was reminded of the old Parisian days, but these folk were simpler and less worldly than the habitués of Mme Bonnier's drawing-room.

She went to walk through the tree-shaded avenues as the sun was settling. Children ran riot everywhere, attended by bonnes in fluted caps, family parties walked together in loquacious amity, fiancés strolled arm-in-arm, paying no heed to the life around them. She entered a patisserie and drank a cup of chocolate and demanded a Baba au Rhum, for she, who had loathed food for days, was hungry with a ravenous schoolboy appetite that called for frequent nourishment. The French neighbour of dinner passed with his mother on his arm. She returned their salutes with a certain forlorn pain creeping back to her. It would be better to withdraw altogether from the world, where she was constantly reminded of what she had relinquished—companionship and love. She struck into a country lane, longing for utter solitude. The road was bordered by brambles, which the peasant dares not touch, however keen his thirst, for are not those the thorns that encircled the head of Christ? The old superstition returned as she saw the ripe clusters of berries tempting a blue-bloused urchin with great solemn eyes. A sudden mother-impulse bade her stop and kiss the wistful little gamin. He answered her questions in stolid surprise that they

should be put by so fashionable a lady, but he grasped at the coins she held out with unchildlike cupidity.

The early September day closed tranquilly over the unvaried landscape. Outside the hotels and pensions, parties of friends sat drinking coffee and making merry. The Casino was brilliantly lighted and looked attractive in its gaiety. Lota saw the élite of the visitors and townspeople gathered there at the roulette tables. She threw a five-franc piece on the cloth, scarcely considering her action, for the light excited her and the peacock-hued mass of people. She won and doubled her stake with a reckless desire to test her luck. The gambling spirit, latent in her nature, had been aroused by her first success. Again a little pile of silver was pushed towards her. "Mademoiselle gagne," said the croupier blandly, and the players around her were covertly envious of her good fortune. As she left the table richer by several golden louis, she met the wondering gaze of a girl in white. Lota remembered the face with its air of pathetic innocence and youth. She had noticed the girl in the Cathedral that morning, kneeling side by side with a wrinkled peasant. The reproach of the fawn-like eyes hurt her for she, too, had made believe to worship, and now she was inspired by the pursuit of the moment's fancy, that had borne her into lifelong misery.

Old and young were playing, with a curious steady attention to the rolling ball and its fateful pauses. A jaded, sallow boy of sixteen stood in the croupier's place and cried incessantly "Messieurs, faites vos jeux.

Monsieur, marquez vos jeux." His voice rang out with stupid parrot-like reiteration. He must be weary of the heat, the foolish rolling ball and the garish cloth before him. The sorry pastime gave him bread, no doubt, but must it not also degrade ?

There was music in an adjoining hall and singing that penetrated shrilly in high, bravura notes. The audience trooped out at intervals and revived the flagging interest in roulette, while silk dresses rustled and soft laughter rose and fell. The girl Lota had pitied was now at the table, hanging on the arm of a coarse middle-aged man. Lota, glancing instinctively at her ungloved hand, gave a start of horror. Poor little girl-wife, striving to keep her husband from the drinking bar by simple, easily frustrated devices ! She was beautifully gowned in white and wore many handsome rings. Sold in her girlish purity to the dissolute man of the world, whose roving leer sought every pretty face appraisingly. There were other brides too, magnificent in trousseau finery, proud of their new state and attentive escorts.

Lota hurried out into the darkness, seeking to rid herself of the painful drama of married life, which to her meant a plunge into unknown dangers, a troubled path of heartache and misunderstanding.

She slept late and woke with a disinclination for the day's journey. The shore was crowded with oddly garbed bathers, ready for a plunge. An Eastern boy was going in and out among the tents, laden with glowing scarves and towels. There was an irrepressible sparkle about the scene, which rendered it radically un-English.

Lota walked to St Malo and found the long-looked-for letter at the Poste-Restante. The Sister bade her welcome and supplied her with information about the journey, a slow and laborious one of several hours.

Lota said farewell at the pleasant vine-clad hotel, amidst a chorus of regrets. They seemed really sorry to see her go, these acquaintances of a day.

She travelled third, and fisherwomen were her first companions. She liked their honest, brown faces and talked to them when occasion demanded; but they were shy and plainly amazed to see a woman of fashion in the same rude wooden wagon as themselves. The train was intolerably slow and there were long hours to wait at dull wayside stations, where the *salles d'attente* offered only the dustiest accommodation; but she was being carried through beautiful coast scenery, and the hope of peace was within her breast. The young priest from the Cathedral entered the same compartment at a wayside station, and blushed in response to a frank greeting. He took out a well-worn breviary and began to read it at once, but it was evident that his thoughts wandered. He had a fine glossy beaver hat of an awkward triangular shape, which could not be easily balanced on the seat. More than once a look of dismay stole over the open face when some clumsy market-woman knocked it down to the sanded floor. He brushed it each time with his coat-sleeve, as if it were dear to his manly pride. Lota felt immeasurably older, wiser and less devout than this blooming ascetic. The quaint costume set off his comeliness admirably—he

wore a long-skirted cassock, knee-breeches, blue woollen stockings and square-toed shoes with large buckles. Lota wondered if he had vanity enough to prize the dress that marked him off from those of worldly profession. Probably he was not a priest at all, she reflected, not even a *kloarek*. Some schoolmaster with a yearning for the spiritual life, perhaps, who would enter the Church some day and meanwhile kept aloof from temptations of the flesh. A lad, in a garb of startling colour, was his companion, chatting on the friendliest terms with his instructor. Lota noted the kindly smile that overspread the youth's face when a child was brought into the compartment. Tears rose to her eyes and a sob, that she could not quite suppress, broke from her. She turned away hurriedly to look through the open window. She could not get away from her trouble.

A gentle hand touched her arm. "You are ill, madame, or do you feel the breeze too much?" The young dévot blushed crimson at his own temerity.

Lota reassured him, and tried to lure him into further conversation, offering a share of her fruit and chocolates; but he refused her gifts and began his prayers again. The boy was more sociable and munched steadily, but he spoke corrupt French and was shy of the quality. Lota watched the pair stride off together down the tumble-down streets of Dol, a sense of losing contact with a mind, wholly pure, upon her.

The train went on through yellow cornfields, past red-roofed houses and white châteaux, by winding river and moorland path, further and further into a future

of sweet forgetfulness. Already, it seemed that years had elapsed since she left the Octagon House, since she shrank through the garish London stations with a guilty fear of detection. The clear air tossed her hair about her brow as the heat gave way to evening cool. Soldiers and sailors filled the train now, for it was the express from Paris to Brest, that carried Lota on her way with accelerated speed for a few miles. Demonstrative partings from mothers and sweethearts took place at village stations, stalwart men were kissed with an abandonment of grief peculiar to the soil. The soldiers were of low stature and lacked the smartness of Tommy Atkins. Lota inclined rather to the sailor lads, wearing the flat, red-bobbined cap of the French fleet.

It was seven o'clock when the express dropped her at a wayside town, where she had to wait for the one evening train to Pernotel. She was glad to avoid the fumes of rank tobacco and the clamour of rough voices, that had assailed her ear for hours. She was advised by a friendly, white-uniformed *chef de gare* to sup at the buffet. Madame had plenty of time. She could obtain good wine, good fish, good soup. Oh! she would reach Pernotel that night. The good sisters would admit her as late as ten o'clock, if she had warned them of her arrival.

A little table was placed in the hotel garden and an excellent supper laid before her—a flask of red wine, a delicious brown sole and crisp bread in tiny rolls. The novel surroundings, the solitude and the gathering twilight caused a dreamy satisfaction to steal over her

senses. The freedom of the open country claimed her; all her heavy care dropped away under its influence. The sun-burnt, broad-cheeked guard of the train smiled cheerily on his one passenger, for he was accustomed to take many of his journeys alone. The single line to Pernotel had only been opened three months before. Damaris Newall had spoken of a diligence.

A wilder part of Brittany succeeded, the rails had been roughly laid through the heart of wood and pasture-land. Rocks rose high, covered with moss and lichen and huge boulders of stone gave evidence of former Celtic worship. Station houses had vanished to be replaced by rude signboards with uncouth names upon them and women with red flags, who acted as signals to the advancing train. This last was a ludicrous precaution, Lota thought, when it was but a single track and trains ran so infrequently.

The night was growing chill but Lota still leaned through the window, drinking in fragrant draughts of green living nectar and gazing at the unfamiliar landscape. One could not get further away than this from slander, envy and all the evils of civilisation. The ego seemed to shrink into the background before this primitive beauty of rural simplicity. The peasants, who trudged on the roads, were sturdily intent on the true objects of existence. Lota guessed them with womanly intuition to be faithful, upright and religious to the core. She knew nothing of the "three vices and four virtues," which a keen-eyed traveller in their land formulated as the Breton character.

The hills rose in silent majesty and many a proud castle frowned upon the intrusive sign of a later age, that puffed so busily on its narrow course. The whole scenery seemed fresh from Nature's hand—it was a land, too, of legend and romance which even the twentieth century had failed to beat into ugly prosperity, where indeed would always linger that aroma of the past, which is the most potent charm to an imaginative mind.

The train stopped at last with a faint muffled whistle, that gave warning of its approach, and Lota alighted on the open road among a crowd of picturesque figures like the chorus of an opera, without the meretricious glitter. There was a lumbering vehicle drawn up in charge of a man, who approached her with a more purposeful air than the peasants, who had come for the nightly excitement of discovering what the nine o'clock train would bring. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and a dusty working suit, like that of a gardener, but he held a long whip in his hand.

"The Convent of the Cross," he repeated several times, endeavouring to recover Lota's bag, which had been seized by the landlord of Le Perroquet Vert. Lota followed him to the diligence, after a short parley, and was driven off with a flourish of the long whip up the stone paved street that rose sheer above the river-bank. Up! up! up! The horses struggled gallantly, swerved round a corner and up again, straining at the harness till the bells jingled gaily. Peering through the curtain, Lota caught glimpses of shops

and houses and a post-office, as they swung by a high stone wall. Long-forgotten French romances thrilled her brain, stories of wicked noblemen who rattled wantonly over the prostrate bodies of their serfs on the way to seignorial manors, historic legends of royal princesses, borne at night into the seclusion of the cloister for state reasons, brides carried off from the altar to grace the leisure of a feudal tyrant. The high wall showed black in the dim twilight, and the great wooden gate, before which they stopped, was barred. The clang of a bell summoned a portress, who looked cautiously through a grating before she unlocked the door. Lota heard the bolts click behind her, half-fearfully. Two women met her, clad in the dark robes of the sisterhood, lanterns in their hands. One was tall, stout, benevolent of aspect, the other had a sterner cast of feature, and was hardly full-grown in stature to English eyes. They welcomed Lota ceremoniously.

"You are then Miss Wynne. We expected you some hours ago. Your journey has been long."

They exclaimed with pity as the light fell on her white face, blanched in contrast with their own sallow skins.

"You must sup at once, and we will take you to your room. You will find it too plain, perhaps, but we have lost much of our possessions for the government does not favour us." They led her up flights of wide stone steps, down echoing corridors, one bearing a candle, the second toiling under the stranger's baggage, despite her protest.

"We are sorry to put you so high, but you may like to change when other guests leave us, if you stay for some weeks."

"Have you then other guests?"

"But yes! There are poor French teachers, who come every summer for the holidays. The last go this week, however. You will be dull."

A lay-sister brought a bowl of milk and a biscuit, and Lota lay down on the pallet-bed to sup luxuriously.

"The sisters make a child of one by their artless kindness," Damaris Newall had said. "It is good sometimes to return to childhood through such simple natures. Dependence is not always ungrateful to my spirit." Nor was it to Lota's as she fell asleep on the straw pillow, with dreams of peace that the sister's last words had inspired. They had not left her till she was supplied with everything their anxious care could supply, and they left her with blessings on their lips. Moved by a sudden impulse Lota kissed the elder woman. "Good-night, ma mère," she said drowsily.

La mère smiled, well pleased at the effects of her cordial reception, good soul. They were delighted to welcome a friend of Miss Newall from across the seas. She had been precious to them as a daughter, the emotional temperament leading her into their hearts with marvellous certainty. Never had they since received a guest, who had left them with such gratitude as Damaris.

CHAPTER XXV

THE jangle of many bells and the striking of the cathedral clock sounded clear on a fine autumn morning. Four, five, six, seven! Lota stirred dreamily, and heard a knock at the door. A peasant-girl entered with rolls and a bowl of coffee. She wore the simple *coiffe* of the district, and her boots sounded noisily on the polished floor. The bells had been ringing for service in the convent chapel, but it was not the first service. The good sisters began to pray at five.

Lota looked round the room eagerly when the girl withdrew. The bed was of wood, with a white canopy suspended from an iron frame-work; it was supplied with fine linen, marked with the holy cross in beautiful embroidery stitch. There was a big oak armoire, and a writing-table, over which hung a terrible representation of the Madonna, gazing serenely upon many suffering souls, who sought her from the flames of purgatory. A prie-dieu with its ebony crucifix had been moved into an obscure corner, out of deference to the heretic guest. The wide stone fireplace was made ready for the coming winter, sticks laid across each other with mathematical precision. The two windows overlooked a quadrangle with a plot of grass and flower-bordered beds. Lota saw a sister hurrying across it with a tin coffee-pot in her hand. The quaint black figure was evidently bent on ministering to the strangers within the walls, for

she entered a narrow doorway through which might be seen a long table, covered with bowls and plates of butter.

Lota dressed in haste, and found her way after several wrong turns to the wide, shallow stairs, that led to a stone-flagged court. Opposite was the refectory, on the right stood the chapel, and on either side were buildings, which she afterwards learnt were kitchens and schoolrooms respectively. The size and dignity of the convent surprised her—it was clearly the time-worn relic of a venerable institution, which had spread its piety far and wide. The carved figure of St John the Baptist stood facing the chapel, and beneath were the words which served as a daily reminder to the nuns of the vows they had taken for life.

"Servir Dieu quel plaisir,
L'honorer quel honneur,
Bénir son très-saint nom,
C'est tout notre bonheur."

The boy, who had carried Lota's bag the night before was whistling at his work of trimming the creeper that grew over the oldest part of the walls. He answered her greeting readily, and seemed disposed for conversation.

"You are looking for the orchard. It is down the path up the flight of steps, Ma'm'selle."

"You are very busy," Lota said, lingering. "What do you do when you are not in the garden?" There was a frank good-nature about the stripling, that appealed to her.

"I attend the priest in the chapel. I carry the cross

on the great days of festival. I sell the fruit and vegetables to people of the town. I meet always the train that comes at night."

The dim twilight scene came back to Lota, with its confusion of strange faces and rustic sounds. It formed, no doubt, a delightful period of excitement to the boy, who had been brought up within conventual walls. It was probably the only means of intercourse he had with the outside world—a strange product of modern civilisation, this sunburnt youth!

Lota's evident interest charmed Yves from his usual taciturnity. He began to question her about England, the land from which so many adventurous souls journeyed forth. He wanted to go to England. He spoke with longing simplicity of his wish, like the child he was in regard to the outer world.

"Perhaps you will some day," Lota said.

"It is too far; it costs a great deal of money to go across the sea."

"But you may save it with industry."

The light in Yves' pale blue eyes brightened.

"I have already saved a little. At Christmas the people of the town remember Yves. That is my name, for I was called after the good saint. You will see many images of him in the churches and cathedrals. He was born near here. You can even see the bed, where he lay as a baby." The name was unknown to Lota then. How familiar was it to become to her, and how dear grew the absurd, squat little figure holding out the kindly hand to beggar-suppliant, while spurning

with cherubic serenity the purse of gold offered by the rich noble! Saint-Yves "avocat mais non pas larrain." She understood later the pride that beamed in his namesake's face.

"Are you going to be a priest?" The boy lacked the grace of the companion of the train. He was heavily-built and unrefined.

"I? Oh, no! I am going under the flags in six months. I shall go to Paris, perhaps. Who knows? It is a beautiful city. There are fine streets and shops and theatres."

Lota felt a pang of pity that here in the calm beauty of the cloister should creep this ugly taint of worldly lust. The rude strong frame before her was in keeping with the landscape, but she pictured it among the riot of carnival sights, with a sense of repugnance.

"You must stay here with the sisters. They need a man to perform the heavier tasks. I have been to Paris. It is a wicked place, where one is often tempted to sin."

Yves shrugged his shoulders unimpressed. "There is sin everywhere," he said sententiously. "Yes, even here in Pernotel. One cannot for ever remain a boy to be scolded by Soeur Marie. I must serve my country; it is the law."

Conscription had claimed his services. He would be dragged through the lowest depths of vice and sordid pleasure. How much of this early purity could remain in his heart?

Yves dug and planted with stolid energy. He was

eighteen, and the young blood surged in him, though he had been bred in strange aloofness from his kind.

"Will you teach me English?" he asked suddenly. "I know some words—'Good-morning,' 'The Convent of the Cross,' 'It rains.'" He brought out the words with boyish pride and looked at Lota for admiration. She could not withhold it as she met the half-roguish, half-pathetic appeal.

"That was very well said. I will teach you some more words, and you must tell me stories of your Brittany."

"I know a beautiful story, which the school-master taught me," Yves said with sudden animation. "I will tell you now, if you will come with me to the orchard. I must prune the trees, but you can sit on the bench and listen as I work."

Lota went with him across the quadrangle, and down a long tree-bordered path. Damaris had spoken with an ache of rapture of the wonderful orchard of Pernotel, whence had emanated the book that raised her to the highest place of genius. It would be peopled with shadows of Damaris, the strange inscrutable personality that had struck sharply across her life, to vanish into an unknown world. Trees, heavy with fruit, clung to the high grey walls over which one had a fairy vision of rivers winding in silvery ribbons among the purple distances of the hills, of gorse-clad paths and pastures of corn, of red and white houses, of splendid churches innumerable, of the great cathedral where reposed the saints. Peaches, plums, nectarines, raspberries—

Pomona had chosen this garden for her own, and stocked it with a lavish hand. There were vegetables too, and a patch of wheat, and grapes and rare flowers in a tiny hothouse. Under the gnarled apple-trees a cow grazed peacefully, guarded by a very old peasant, whose voice uttered shrill objurgations to her charge in the Breton tongue. Lota sat down with the glamour of dreamland stealing over her, and listened to the monotonous voice of Yves as he recited the old conte, which was oddly characteristic of a certain hardihood that crept sometimes into the midst of pious reverence.

"There was once a gay fellow of the name of Moustache, a rascal who loved songs and dances, and the pretty young girls of his village better than work, at which he was but a trifler. He had been hardly brought up by his uncle, and when he was eighteen he resolved to go out into the world to shift for himself. Taking his stick, his knapsack and some bread, he left his home, and the tears still wet on his cheeks, began a merry chant. As he walked he met three travellers by the way. The first said to him, 'Good-day, Moustache. We are God's people, but we are poor. Give us bread to eat in the name of Jesus Christ.'

"'I cannot refuse since you ask in that name,' said Moustache. 'Take all that I have.'

"When he had spoken, the three strangers became splendid with garments of gold, and one said, 'Thank you, my honest fellow. I am Jesus Christ and these are Peter and Paul. Make three wishes, and they shall be granted at once.'

"'Ask for a place in Paradise,' whispered St Peter; but Moustache did not heed him.

"'Son of God,' said he, taking off his hat, 'I ask for a beautiful wife, a pack of cards that will always win the game, and a sack in which to stifle the devil.'

"'You shall have your wish. Go in peace,' said Jesus Christ.

"The travellers vanished, and Moustache went on his way. To cut the matter short, he freed a lovely princess, who became his wife, and overcame the Evil One by means of his sack and his cards. But good fortune soon passes, and, at the height of his happiness Moustache fell ill and died. However, he was not discomposed. He found that there were two roads before him, the one hard and thorny, the other a royal way, down which passed so great a crowd that one would think there was a feast in that direction. Moustache, being fond of company, took the broad road, and arrived at the door of Hell. He knocked, Rat-tat!

"'Who is there?' asked Satan.

"'I, Moustache,' replied the sinner. 'Open!'

"'Away!' cried the Devil. 'We do not want you. You are too cunning a rogue.'

"Moustache retraced his steps, and took the thorny way. He thus approached the gates of Paradise. He knocked. Rat-tat!

"St Peter put his head through the wicket.

"'You, Moustache? What seek you here?'

"'I am come for my place.'

"'There is no place for you in Paradise,' replied

St Peter. 'You refused it when you made your three wishes. Go elsewhere.' And St Peter shut his wicket.

"Poor Moustache scratched his head like a novice, who is asked a hard question, but happily he was a lad who would have sold the Holy Virgin herself without shame. He decided that he must outwit the porter. He took his hat in both hands and threw it over the wicket right into Paradise. Then he knocked once more.

"St Peter asked what he wanted.

"'Open the door,' said Moustache, 'that I may go to seek my hat, which I threw over the gate in a fit of rage.'

"'A wise man never parts with his hat,' answered St Peter. 'You shall not enter.'

"'Then,' said Moustache, 'it will remain in Paradise to keep a place for me till the day of Resurrection, and after the Judgment you will be obliged to receive me among the blessed.'

"Saint Peter, struck by his argument, opened the door. 'Come and fetch it, then, and depart at once,' he said. But once inside, Moustache began to run into Paradise, like a horse turned to grass.

"'Saint Peter,' he cried, 'a wise man never parts with his hat. It is you who have said it, and I will never leave mine.'

"And he sat down, like a tailor, on his brown hat. When they saw him the saints began to laugh, and the Holy Virgin said that he must be allowed to remain where he was.

"And ever since then Moustache has been in Paradise, seated on his hat, and awaiting the Last Judgment."

Lota listened to the artless narrative with some surprise. She was not so shocked by the impropriety of allowing the scapegrace to "escamoter" into Paradise, as astonished by Yves' simple acceptance of the story. He had told it with earnestness, and evidently looked upon it as a gem, peculiar to his native district. It was certainly more amusing than most of the impossible miracles of saints to which she had listened, and the French phraseology was crudely dramatic. She thanked the reciter with a warmth that made him blush with delight, and wandered further into the mazes of the orchard. A Sister was hanging out clothes in front of a wooden wash-house, for no humble toil was held to degrade in this community. She left her occupation to conduct Lota through the garden with a courtesy, that seemed to belong to the very atmosphere of Pernotel.

"This is one source of our income," she said, pointing to the goodly harvest. "We are very poor, and the taxes are heavy. Government does not favour us. Our little children have been taken away from us that we may not teach them. The schoolrooms are empty—they used to be so full."

"You have been deprived of your means of livelihood," Lota said, thinking of the great labyrinths of tiny cells she had seen.

"We do not need much to sustain life. It is not the money that grieves us, for we can work to maintain our community, or go across the sea to your kind land. But how sad it is to think of the poor children growing up without instruction in the religion, which is life itself."

The dignity of the Sister's attitude struck Lota forcibly as they passed the rows of garments, washed by the roughened, yet finely-made hands. The austere garb, mended and shabby from exposure to sun and rain, did not lack grace. Starched head-dress and bands were snowy and delicate; the folds of the gown hung with a certain elegance about the tall, thin figure.

"You have lived here a long time?" Lota asked, conscious of a keen desire to understand this alien existence.

"For nearly forty years." The answer startled her by its quiet directness. She looked at the sister with a perplexity she could not disguise. The high forehead was lined, and the skin had innumerable wrinkles, but the eyes gleamed with the fire of youth, and the lips parted readily in a smile over white, strong teeth.

"You are astonished that one should choose to spend one's whole life in a convent. Ah! I love the regularity, the sameness, the peace of this life. It is far, far better than the joy and excitement of the world, and then—death. Here we always stand prepared for the one inevitable change. We neither dread nor desire it till our time is appointed, for we are content to wait till God thinks it wise to take us back. I am sorry for those poor women, who, not having the vocation for marriage, spend their days unloved, longing for a home and kind faces round them every day. Marriage is perhaps the fortunate destiny. We are not all fortunate."

She must have been very handsome, Lota reflected.

She was distinguished even in this disguising garb, that cloaked so many others.

They had reached a tiny burial-ground, surrounded by high yew-trees, and planted with rose-bushes. Lota read the names on the tombstones with wondering awe. Maria Heloise née Le Braz. How strange that this separation from the world should represent a betrothal! They were nearly all old when they died. Seventy-two, seventy-eight, eight-four. The ages graven on the stones pointed to the longevity of ascetic living.

Lota learnt much of the ways of the little community, as she paced up and down with Soeur Marie de Saint Jean. The nuns rose at half-past five in summer and winter alike, and attended matins in the early dawn. Their meals were only two in number, and of the most frugal description, a severe penance being imposed of a glass of water sipped between meals. Six hours a day was spent in devotion, and the remainder was now filled by household duties. They sat down on a bench beneath a magnificent fig-tree, under whose branches whole generations might have basked as in patriarchal times. Yves was cutting the wheat close by, armed with the most antiquated of scythes.

The Sister's searching gaze fell on him, and she called to him in Breton. He replied with a sullen cast on his face.

"He spoke French to me just now," Lota observed, "and a little English too. He is ambitious."

"He wants to be a gentleman," the nun said sighing. "He is too fond of talking of what he means to do when he leaves us. He is rather ungrateful, I think."

"Has he always lived at the convent?" Lota asked.

"From a baby. His father was of noble birth, it was said, in Pernotel, and his poor mother came to us in her trouble, for she had been taught in our school. Yves was left here when she died. He has never known any other home. He works well, but he is often discontented."

Sister Marie stiffened with disapproval. She did not study the laws of heredity, and blamed, as unnatural, faults which proceeded from a breach of social laws. Class distinctions were rigidly fixed in her scheme of life. If they were not observed, then there must be suffering for those who departed from their trammels, but other lives need not be sacrificed. A pious upbringing should uproot the seeds of sins planted by the generators of the child who received it.

Lota wanted to see the fine face relax into its usual genial patience. Yves had attracted her by his naïveté and obvious physical strength; his back bent over his labour as though fatigue were impossible, and the wide straw hat disguised his clumsy features. She was reminded of her husband. He returned, a banished factor of life, into the quiet orchard fit only for Arcadian inhabitants. Was he angry? Was he hurt? She blushed a fiery red, as she felt Soeur Marie's probing gaze upon her. She was deceiving these good women by the resumption of her maiden name. They did not know her as a runaway wife, or they would not have received her. They accepted her simply as a friend of Miss Newall's, who had come in search of rest. She was beginning to feel that rest already in her tormented

soul. She would not think of George. She would absorb herself in this wonderful, primitive life of Pernotel. She asked the nun for instruction in the lore of the neighbourhood. She was not a Roman Catholic, but she reverenced the Church. So she heard a strange medley of legends and histories pure, sweet in their teaching, yet often of an unmoral justice, and she saw with dim understanding the aspect, which life bears to the mind of those who are truly looking rather to the Hereafter and intangible, than to the real and Present.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE "clapotement" of sabots sounded noisily on the stone-paved street of the market-square. It was nearly ten o'clock, and the bustle of buying and selling was at its height.

The grand cathedral of the thirteenth century frowned a little coldly on the old traffic, that had taken place about its worm-eaten doors for so many hundred years, and the carved figure of Pernotel's one famous man seemed to sneer at the busy crowd, which thronged the foot of the statue, as if in mockery of its eager worldliness. It was a strange juxtaposition. Lota thought, the memorial of the great atheist placed opposite the splendid building, erected in honour of the faith he had worked to destroy. She felt the force of an intellect, that had dared to emancipate itself from the creed in which it had been nurtured by such reverent parents as she saw assembled daily in their church. She had learnt the story of the statue, which had caused fierce revolt among the peasant inhabitants of Pernotel.

The admirers of the atheist had subscribed for it, and unveiled it with ostentatious indifference to the hostility of the Catholic Church they had outraged, while with fervent prayers the faithful had gathered together enough money to raise a beautiful Calvary, far removed from shops and the temptations of existence, on the highroad, where every passer-by might fall down and

pay reverence on the way to labour or festivity. The bitter wrath, the heart-burning, had been provocation of bloodshed, for the government supported those inimical to the Church, and endeavoured to prevent a public ceremony at the *Calvaire de Protestation*, while the priesthood made an occasion for mourning where crowds assembled from all parts of France to behold the fame of one who denied their teaching.

Lota was wandering at the heels of the cuisinière, a young, merry-faced nun, who enjoyed her chaffering mightily.

Here was a stall bestrewn with small ware—pins, lace, ribbons, and all the minor accessories of the toilet. Girls in black capes and embroidered "tabliers" surrounded it, decrying the value of the articles they coveted and bargaining shrilly. Matrons turned and twisted the plain hats and coats on another stall, that would last their offspring for many seasons, and must therefore be of durable texture. An old woman sat with the tranquillity of age on a low stool, surrounded by pairs of wooden shoes. "Depuis douze sous." Lota could not resist the temptation to purchase, and tried to walk in a pair, to the loud amusement of the bystanders. It was more difficult than she imagined, and her feet were weary when she relinquished them, and followed Soeur Thérèse to the butter stall. How fresh and fragrant and redolent of country rites it looked in the great linen bundles, which were placed on scales and weighed amidst loud clatter! The cuisinière packed her portion away in the large black pannier, she carried and

proceeded to test the poultry. Lota was horrified to see that the owners of the fine poulets carried them unceremoniously by the legs or flung them into clawing heaps until they met with a buyer. The sister laughed at her horror. She was the youngest and gayest member of the community, and had only just completed her novitiate. "I used to carry our chickens so all the way from Landonnat," she said. "It does not hurt them much. And what matter, since they must be killed quite soon?"

Lota turned to examine some fruit, and, for a small sum, received enough for a frugal meal. She was going next Sunday to the Pardon at Landonnat, and must lay in a supply of food to eat on her way. It was a long walk, but the season of pardons was well-nigh over, and she was anxious to witness one of the strange survivals of the Roman Catholic Church. Yves was going too. He had given her full directions about the route to be traversed, and advised an early start. The service did not begin till three, but there was much to be seen in the village, for every good Catholic of the neighbourhood would be there in gala attire.

Lota set off when Sunday came, before the September day had emerged from mist. She had attended mass at the Cathedral, and had breakfasted at seven o'clock in her room. She was now the last guest of the convent, and did not descend for meals to the great salle-à-manger. She passed nearly the whole day out of doors, and invaded the farm-houses for milk and bread, when she needed food. She had already learnt much concerning

the simple ménage of the Breton farmer. She was familiar with the one large room serving for sitting-room and bedroom, earthen-floored and furnished with austere sparseness. She expected to see the great oaken armoire, the grandfather's clock, and the *lit clos* which were evidently the foundation of every respectable family. She had sat in the chimney-corner of open fire-places, and watched the preparation of potage or coffee over the flames in the gipsy fashion, which delighted her. She had been conducted up ancient towers to bedrooms filled with high curtained beds, and containing treasured heirlooms in the shape of lace-embroidered bridal coiffes and precious shawls of the sombre shades prevalent in the district. She had drunk wine and broken bread with humble tillers of the soil, whose manners had the courtly ease of natural kindliness. She had heard legends of the country transmitted from generation to generation, and she had been made privy to family histories, which showed her the enduring courage of a brave race, more clearly than a thousand narratives of sham sentimentalists, writing in the artificial life of cities.

To-day she passed few dwellings, and met only a stray beggar on her way for the first three miles. She was pleased with the free generosity which made the alms-quester independent, in his dependence on her charity. She had learnt that each mendicant is sure of an ungrudging shelter, wherever he may speed on his weary feet. "Le Dieu vous bénisse." She had only dropped a few sous into the tin, which the blind man's dog

presented, but his thanks rang in her ears till he was out of sight. She had never once felt an alien in this land, where the whole round of existence was so far severed from experience of life, as to seem like a dream of bygone romance. She went everywhere secure from danger, with the trust in those she met that rendered them slaves to her service. "*La belle Anglaise*" gained friends wherever fancy led her. The priests lent her books, the innkeepers showed her picture post-cards, the merchants advised her as to prices and economy, the cottagers listened with absorbed interest to her accounts of the country, which to their innocent minds was an El Dorado of wealth and marvel.

Lota rested on a grassy bank, and took from her pocket a homely package of provisions. She eat with keen enjoyment, an object of interest to many urchins who were too shy to answer her genial questions. A troop of mounted police passed, doffing their hats with one accord, and calling an admiring salutation. Black looks followed them as peasants came forth from the houses of the tiny hamlet, and more than one muttered curse. They were on the way to dispel the Sisters of the Ursuline Convent, who went in and out among the sick of the town, and were blessed by rich and poor alike. Lota felt caught up on a passionate wave of sympathy for the women, whose lives of narrow devotion had rendered them pathetically unfit to cope with the world on which they would be cast. She, too, hated the government, and the cruel laws that brought ruin and desolation into the fairest lives. Her husband

would have raved at the cruel injustice of it all! He would have befriended the helpless women, even though all his prejudices fought against their doctrines. Lota experienced a sudden yearning for his company in the midst of the arcadian scene. She knew that he would be in accord with any primitive or natural surroundings, though he moved but awkwardly in the social pageant of convention. His honest, loyal nature would have made him true fellow to the sturdy Breton, content through years to labour at his duty, and take the pleasures of his ancestors, without desire for feverish activity.

Lota pursued her path up a steep hill, and through a larger bourg than any she had traversed. Women were beginning to make their toilets, and gossip of the fête of the afternoon. From distant farms knots of quaint figures converged on the main road, the men in stiff felt hats with hanging ribbons, trousers of cerulean hue, black coats and white collars, the women in the ancient flowing robes, the starched coiffes and festive apron of the Côtes-du-Nord, the children hideously garbed in modern style, a warning against departure from tradition. The bells could be heard ringing in the distance as the mid-day sun grew warm, and the roads were thick with the pardon crowd. There were whining beggars or every disease and malformation, lads come to make merry with a blue-eyed "douce," who would plight their rustic troth that day, children in white robes arrayed thus splendidly for their first mass. Landonnat was gay with stalls and caravans. A wooden merry-go-round was whirling to the strains of a wheezy

melody, hard by the very church, inns and cafés were filled with the clamour of tongues and the clink of glasses.

> " On ne passe pas sans entrer,
> On n'entre pas sans boire,
> On ne boit pas sans payer."

Lota read the odd inscription on " *Les trois poules, à la descente des voyageurs,*" and decided to evade the threat. She was not much tempted either by the gingerbread, hard pears and coloured sweets purveyed in the streets. She resolved to wait till the service was over before taking coffee. There were quiet wayside houses, where one could avoid the throng, that was unsavoury in its dense masses.

Lota entered the church, and sat down on the side reserved for women, paying a sou to the angular peasant, who went the round of the seats with a wooden dish. The altar was a vivid blaze of colour—crimson flowers were packed into a bank of beautiful perfume, and amidst them stood hundreds of tiny candles, offered to the Virgin in expiation of the faults of the community. The young girls, robed in the state garments of white cloth, sat behind the priest, and beyond the choir were tiny, self-conscious children, brought for the first time into the sacred communion of God. A nun sat at a harmonium, but from above the congregation an organ sounded in more solemn notes.

The chants were monotonous, wanting sometimes in musical harmony, but the priest's voice was singularly rich and mellow. The Latin words rolled grandly from his tongue to be re-echoed by the

choir and congregation. It was a long petition for forgiveness, a confession of sins, a general purging of the conscience. Lota gazed at the priest in perplexity. He was grossly corpulent, red-faced, of arrogant expression; and his costly, many-coloured vestments made him look like the foolish puppet of ceremony some deemed him. Was he sincere? The hearts of the peasants turned to him in hours of need, and the rulers of a republic feared his sovereignty. He was symbolic of tradition that died hard, might never die. He was not of the age that tramples religion into a mere formula. There was beneath his pulpy self-complacency the power to draw out the best in the souls of those around him to win reverence from a people who had revolted from the tyranny of aristocracy. Most of the priests were drawn from the peasant families, Lota had been told. She contrasted this priest with the man on an opposite bench, and sighed. Something had entered the son of the church, which endowed him with the confidence he had in his own omnipotence. He looked on the people in the intervals of the chants with the air of one who claims homage he will receive, without fail, in the name of a greater whom he serves. Much wine had gone to the accumulation of such obesity, much pampering of animal wants, but not much indolence. Lota had seen the priest hobbling on gouty feet many miles from his own bourg on errands of pious ministry. She had heard of his good works from the Sisters, and from many humble sufferers. She bowed her head with her neighbours, and banished her doubts with a sense of shame.

The pale nun at the harmonium was bent in rapt obeisance. There was a great hush of solemn penitence throughout the little church. Sins were atoned for that had weighed on the culprits for months of dire repentance. The Holy Mother forgave, and the sinner might prostrate himself at her feet with thanksgiving. Again the Latin chants rolled forth, this time with loud praise in their strains. More than one ventured a glance of pride at an offering that had cost much labour. Lota saw that there were votive tablets on the walls, offered in thanks for mercies past, and there were some queer little carved boats given by the wives of fishermen after shipwreck. Horace's lines returned to her with illumination. She had imagined that gratitude was an old-fashioned grace. And suddenly a sense of personal cleansing came to her with the acknowledgment of sin, which she was repeating mechanically. She saw the faults and follies of her year of marriage in the light of sins against the Almighty she had forgotten. She had been saved by some invisible kind hand that held her back from utter despair and ruin. She would receive the help with all humility, and would take up her life again as these weather-beaten wives and mothers taught her. She would make up to her husband for the wrong she had done him, and to her unborn child. She knelt in mute submission to the destiny that she had rebelled against, seeing with new hope the beauty and peace of a commonplace lot, transformed by devotion to duty.

The choir filed out of the church in a slow procession,

followed by girls bearing the statue of the Virgin, and tall banners of blue and white that mingled in varied, shimmering waves of colour. The priests walked by the side, books in hand, still chanting as they walked. The congregation poured out into the street and joined in the singing heartily. The white-coiffed heads of the women stood out in picturesque purity among the black robes and brilliant banners. The church bells were ringing with the light, insistent peal of marriage-bells. The whole scene was one of rejoicing after sorrow. Two by two the procession wound its way, in and out of the narrow lanes, to an open stretch of grass where all knelt down to receive the benediction.

There was none of the vulgarity of a public exhibition of contrition in England. It was the natural atmosphere for the ceremony, that derives nothing from the advance of civilisation. Tawdry vestments and patched dresses were lost sight of in the wide background of green hedge and shading tree. Neither was there any touch of pagan barbarity in the quiet spectacle of kneeling flock and pastor, with hands upraised to bless. The very harshness of the Breton tones was subdued into a touching music. Not a soul could hear without receiving perhaps but some vague impression of a magnanimous spirit, that restored happiness to the troubled mind. This was the real cause of rejoicing, not the best robes, the meeting of sweethearts, the garish pleasures of the fair. This was the precious custom that neither atheist nor outcast dare banish into oblivion.

Lota left Landonnat as the sun was setting with the

knowledge of a new creed. She stopped at a tiny café by the road for refreshment, feeling that she must offer a thank-offering to one, at least, of her fellow-worshippers. A little widow hurried to serve her down a flight of wooden stairs. There were only a few boxes of biscuits, a dozen flasks of wine, and a canister of coffee in the minute shop. She made the coffee on a fire, kindled in haste, while Lota sat on the one wooden bench and waited for the meal. It was black and smoky, but the guest did not remark on its deficiencies. She talked rather absently and sipped it, without noticing the taste.

Presently, the widow produced a large white bundle, and, unrolling it, displayed a great red volume with gilt edges. It was a prize her one daughter had gained at the school of Pernotel. But she was indeed a clever girl, Louise, and she could speak English. She was away now, working very hard that she might one day be a teacher. Everyone remarked on her diligence, her astonishing capacity. That was one of her certificates on the wall. She was only eleven when she had received it, and it had been presented by the mayor. The proud mother dived into a wooden box and brought forth a bundle of cahiers, tied round with string, and a piece of needle-work. Louise always sent them home. She was a dutiful daughter, and knew they gave her mother pleasure, though she was not able to read.

Lota saw them through eyes blinded with tears. Might Louise not prove ungrateful to this love and trust! Might this poor widow find solace for her hard, humble tasks in the joy of motherhood! She knew that her

secret was guessed for the first time that day. This woman had felt sure of sympathy in her maternal pride. She put money into the coarse hand, half ashamed to give material tribute. The nakedness of the room made it welcome, and it would be spent on Louise. She went on to Landonnat, like Christian relieved of his bundle. The lonely dreads that had threatened to settle into morbid wretchedness were gone for ever, while this new hope gave fresh courage to a heart that was still young. She was very rich—she had one great love, and the prospect of a greater. George would come to her, and she would make to him the confession she had made in the tiny church of Landonnat.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE mirror of Damaris Newall's dressing-room reflected a brilliant vision of fair frailty. Clad in a low satin gown of the early Victorian period, she looked slighter and more fragile than ever, but the triumph of her rôle lurked in the great sad eyes, and curled the lips which were reddened to pouting beauty.

Damaris had sent away her dresser, and was waiting for the first scene of the Third Act. She was tired to-night, and rest seemed the one thing desirable—rest, and the embrace of the man she loved with the passionate fervour of a nature, that touches few other natures in real sympathy. The light of genius in her eyes was dimmed by tears, as she thought wearily of the long years she had waited for Sir Roland Traherne. He was free, now, from the claim which had separated her from him. She could claim, at last, the devotion which she had refused to receive. Perhaps she had been too punctilious of his honour. The cousin, to whom he had been betrothed, had not hesitated to rescind her vows when she had met another lover. Had Roland's coldness warned her of the truth, or had she discovered that for years he had sent love-tokens to another woman? "I could not have asked less for myself," Damaris reflected. "Just once a year, and she might live with him, feel his kiss on her lips, talk to him in daily communion. It was not too much."

She looked in the mirror at her own reflection, and seemed to see the marks that lonely toil had left. A wrinkle, a dark shadow, a strain that robbed the smile of youthful joy, she noted them with merciless criticism. It was not the best that she had to give this man who was princely enough to demand radiant charm in his wife. Would he be disappointed when he saw her? Would her genius atone for the gifts she had always craved? He had admired her in the old Indian days for her wit and spiritual qualities, but she had been transformed, then, by her great happiness. She was the object of wild adoration as the apotheosis of Becky, that adventuress who exploited so many hearts. As Damaris Newall, she had received comparatively little homage. There was Richard Carroll, but his affection was of the humdrum, friendly strain that seemed part of everyday existence. She had wanted a hero of romance and Sir Roland Traherne with his manly beauty created the part to perfection. He had inspired all her best work, though she had disguised him with skill, to keep her secret until it might be known to all the world, for she had never really believed that he would marry his cousin. Marriages arranged by a worldly father seldom met with the approval of a romantic daughter. She owed a debt of gratitude to Maria Traherne, though the girl might surely have refused Roland, at the outset, if she did not love him.

Damaris put some jewels in her ears and clasped a necklace round her slender throat. Her neck and shoulders were exquisitely graceful, but the bones showed too

plainly beneath the smooth white skin. She was cold and the stones felt icy to her shrinking flesh. A sudden distaste for her rôle had come upon her with the deadly fatigue that threatened to break her courage. Dare she go on to the stage with this dread upon her? The words and gestures seemed to have slipped away from her, although yesterday they had been as vivid as real life. Her actions must be wooden and mechanical unless she felt, thought and spoke as Becky Sharp. She had created a new heroine from the pages of a bygone writer —she had not till this moment experienced the sense of aloofness from the character, that conveys itself swiftly to an audience. She was doomed to fail at the height of her wonderful success. She would lose her hold on the public she had scorned and esteemed her plaything. Was her body to prevail over her brain and soul? The dogged strength of her vitality rebelled against the numbed inaction that crept over her limbs. Another night she would awaken to the possibilities of drama and assume without effort, the guise of the woman whose semblance regarded her mockingly from the mirror before which she sat, and another night she would realise that which she had lost by the apathy of an hour's mood. She knew the fickle applause of the theatrical world, and how lightly it was won and destroyed. A thousand rivals would be ready to suceeed her, and the sensation of a season would pass into obscurity. She must ring the bell and summon the manager to a hasty conclave. Better not to act, than to stand a laughing-stock before the eyes of the crowded

theatre. There would be a scene, if she insisted on leaving the theatre before the conclusion of the piece. He would expostulate and reason with her. She was not ill, and a mere caprice was not a reason for the breach of contract of which he would accuse her. She was not the spoiled beauty of musical comedy, whose vogue would last till her charms were superseded by more dazzling rivals. She had fought a hard battle to secure her tardy laurels, and many had prophesied failure. She must exercise her boasted will-power and overcome the lethargy which deprived her of the dramatic force she needed to sustain her through the great dénouement. She arranged a sparkling tiara above her becurled forehead—it was the gift of a wealthy admirer she detested. Her head ached beneath its weight as surely Becky's never ached, when she donned the spoils wrested from the Marquis at the cost of her husband's honour.

A note was brought to her as she put the finishing touches to her toilet with reluctant fingers. She opened it, expecting adulation or bold importunities. "Will you do me the honour of supping with my party after the play to-night. You are magnificent. I long for the next act.—ROLAND."

He had come in response to her letter across the seas, that divided them, had come with marvellous speed to gain her side. He must have witnessed the dull drama which had inspired in her such ennui.

Her letter was pushed into the low corsage, till it lay close to her throbbing heart. So Becky had concealed a note which she should not have received. Her sin was a

light one, for no neglected wife could be lacerated by Roland's act. Her eyes shone bright beneath her pencilled brows, the colour on her cheeks and lips enhanced the fairness of her arms and breast. She breathed a sigh of satisfied vanity as she took up her fan ready for the call. She was eager to dazzle her lover by the wondrous powers she had developed. He should be proud of the woman he had chosen. He loved incense and praise,—he had been accustomed to its tributes all his life. Richard Carroll might be shocked by the immorality of her reincarnation of Rebecca, but Sir Roland Traherne was of the world, and would lose sight of the sin in admiration of the sinner.

She surprised herself in the act that followed, and the plaudits of the whole house recalled her after the curtain fell. She had been unconscious of nothing outside her rôle, while she crashed from triumph to despair, but as she re-entered, her glance fell on Sir Roland standing at the back of a box, with the charmed enthusiasm she had evoked as Roxane on his handsome face.

She trembled when she stood once more before her mirror. She had locked the door, and was alone. The memory of the years of separation tore at her heart, and laid bare the bleeding wound of her loyal sacrifice. He had come in the hour of her great need as she had always dreamed he would come. He had saved her from ruin by his presence that night. But the joy was too sudden for comprehension. She felt dazed by the one look at his face—she hardly dared to realise that it was not a fleeting vision vouchsafed for an instance. Within a month she

might be his wife. She lingered at her dressing-table that she might have the delight of anticipation, she allowed herself to wander far in the realms of imagination, without fear of the awakening.

A small casket was in the drawer of her dressing-table, securely locked and guarded. She opened it and poured forth the contents with regal carelessness. There were letters on thin perfumed rice-paper, and poems and some Oriental ornaments. She fastened a brooch at her bosom and slipped some filigree bracelets on her wrists. The jewels matched ill with the dress she had retained, but the time had come when they might proclaim her love. She threw a great fur cloak about her bare shoulders and took up the heavy, old-fashioned fan she had used on the stage. She even retained the quaint vinaigrette of the Victorian era, which was one of the properties that were strewn lavishly about the Curzon Street drawing-room.

She left the mirror with a courtesy of acknowledgement. "My mirror tells me I am lovely. Why should I believe that it lies?"

Sir Roland was standing at the stage entrance, tall and imposing in his Anglo-Indian arrogance. A very fair young girl was clinging to his arm. She looked tired, and a little cross.

"You have come at last. We began to fear that other admirers had claimed you. Let me present you to my wife. Lettice has been longing to make your acquaintance ever since we arrived in town."

Damaris' falsely smiling face gleamed with something

of Rebecca's wickedness at the delicately beautiful bride. Her voice had a caressing inflection when she spoke that made her words irresistible. She would have no mercy, as she had received none in all her hard, lonely, bitter life. Of what avail faithfulness, scrupulous honour, and the lavished treasures of a woman's whole heart? She compelled Traherne's attention, she fascinated him by the exercise of her glancing wit. Laughter and raillery filled the carriage with mirth as they drove to the Savoy. Only young Lady Traherne shrank back in her corner, and wondered if insult had ever scathed other wives like this.

They were joined by friends of Sir Roland's when they reached the hotel, smart women of greater claims to social prestige than to the society of genius, and officers, who greeted the famous actress with unfeigned rejoicing. Damaris held them all under the sway of her personality. The other women were silenced one by one and reduced to a consciousness of mediocrity, the men listened with keen appreciation to the words that fell crisply original from the lips that were sacred to Sir Roland's kiss. They did not notice her unusual costume, they passed over with indulgence the rouge, the powder and the false curls. To-morrow they could boast of having seen the great Miss Newall relax into gaiety. She was held preternaturally cold, reserved, and indifferent to homage.

Richard Carroll saw the party a mark for many interested comments. He was cold and sick with the thought that Damaris knew her idol to be clay. What horrible trick of circumstance had taken Traherne to the theatre

when she was acting? The man lacked the decency of his class in his fatuous, complacent belief in his own omnipotence. He must needs grace his bridal board with the woman he had caused to worship him and carelessly abandoned. The finely cut, high-bred features filled Carroll with disgust, for the man had an air of gracious chivalry that enabled him to cloak his inner grossness with the ease that deceived without the aid of cunning. No wonder that Damaris, a beauty-lover, a starving soul, a dreamer, had fallen under the sway of such superb egoism. She would need to be clad in proof armour to resist the witchery of being wooed by a man for whom belles innumerable had sighed in vain.

Carroll scanned his rival with the intense interest of rivalry, not a tone of expression escaping his observation. He knew now why Damaris had remarked on the shape of his own hands. Traherne's fingers were of the same taper slimness, though they had the curves of subtle sensualism, which his lacked. She was such an epicure in her demands, this Damaris. She had never cared for the appeal of love till it was made in the voice that commanded even in entreaty.

What mockery that her choice should have fallen on one who did not know the meaning of sincerity! She had often reserved that one virtue for her own in repeating a catalogue of faults. She had hated sham and falsity with the fierceness of her strong courageous spirit, she had turned in disdain from fickle friends.

"Yes, I will come and dine with you, but not to-morrow. Ah! you are wrong, Sir John. It is neither

a better supper nor a better mistress that provides my excuse. And Lady Traherne will forgive me if I talk to you of the salad days, when we both danced with those whom we ought not to have danced with, and left undanced with——"

"The obese, the respectable, the stodgy and the slanderous?" an aide-de-camp struck in. "How many Amelias you must have gummed to the ballroom-benches!"

Poor little Lady Traherne! She was talking bravely to a yawning member of her husband's family, who pitied her as a fool who had been shown her folly rather soon in married life. Damaris was cruel. The first thoughts of disloyalty to his mistress sprang into Carrol's mind at the sight of Lady Traherne's quivering lip. She had been wretchedly duped herself, but she need not expose this innocent creature to a like torture.

He watched Damaris with rising anger. She was avenging her wrongs with the craft of a pantheress mortally assailed. She was extorting from her false lover the violent infatuation he had felt for her before. She was setting to work to win the heart that she had believed to beat for her in true love, that she might scorn it when it was tardily offered in return for her blind worship. She would not suffer humiliation. Pride formed one of the strongest components of her strange character. If that was left, she would make a gallant fight against the appearance of defeat. She would subjugate the man, who had discarded the love, that had been treasured for his acceptance. Lady Traherne was no

match for the cleverest actress of the day. He was reminded of the famous banquet, as the two drank to each other, and jested and laughed. Damaris was playing a dangerous game, and how superbly she concealed its danger! Nobody would guess that, beneath the splendid satin, a broken heart suffered its last pangs. To all intents and purposes, Damaris would soon be dead. The love had failed which had kept her pure through temptations and sordid struggles. She was dying there in the gilded, luxurious room with fashionable London around her, heedless of her death. Hope had gone, trust had gone and—love. He did not believe that she was capable of loving the unworthy and the base. She knew Sir Roland as he was, no generous wielder of sceptre or far-off dreamland phantasy.

Damaris was dying with the eyes of the world upon her—there would not be whimpering at fate, or fear of the unknown. She would crush out the last remains of life with her own hands, that her cries might not be heard at the end.

Carroll saw what had once been Damaris pass out long after midnight, hanging on Sir Roland's arm. They were both talking of a motor excursion, which was not to include the other members of the party.

"I am so glad you had not forgotten me," Damaris' voice came hard and clear.

Sir Roland's answer was so low that his face almost touched hers, as he handed her into the carriage, and turned in silence to his wife. Surely Damaris' death would be paid for by this man. Passion distorted

his features to a mask-like resemblance of himself; his eyes were blazing and his smile had lost the insolence of satisfaction with the world.

There was something that he wanted, and feared he might not grasp. His very walk was less assured in its gait. Regret was robbing him of complacency, but not regret for Damaris' death, rather the ignoble regret a deliberately chosen gift can bring, when it is outshone by the one rejected.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DRIZZLING rain had driven pedestrians from the London streets. The West End was practically deserted on the dreary mid-September day. Damaris Newall shivered before a wood fire in her sitting-room, and tried to hide her misery from Mrs Winter. She was extraordinarily susceptible to the varying of the elements. She loved sun and warmth, and shrank from the blasts, which invigorate hardier natures. Although she had been exposed to climatic changes all her life, she had never overcome her shrinking from their effects. She was wearing a silk gown of the violet shade she knew to counteract her lack of colour, and hat and gloves of the same hue lay on a side table, with a great cluster of rare orchids. Bracelets jangled on her wrists, some recently acquired. A splendid emerald fastened the lace at her throat.

"What a horrid waste of my best frock!" she exclaimed peevishly. "It is three o'clock, and no prospect of a change. We cannot go to Richmond to-day, Isa. It is too annoying. I hate Peacock—he is so outrageously cheerful."

She was reading a book, which she had taken carelessly from one of the many shelves that ran round the walls. It was rather a library than a drawing-room, where she sat, for there were few traces of a woman's presence. The chairs were luxurious, and the carpet was of velvet

pile, but the desk and bureau told of a busy woman, piled as they were with manuscripts and masses of correspondence.

"'Learning?'" Damaris quoted at random. "'What has a woman to do with learning? And valour! Who ever heard a woman commended for valour? Meekness and mildness, and softness and gentleness, and tenderness and humility, obedience to her husband, and faith in her confessor and domesticity, or as learned doctors call it, the faculty of stayathomeitiveness'—good word that last. I must send it to Bunny Weir, who has cast away all restraint and joined the suffragettes. 'Och! violet and vermilion!' There comes Richard Carroll, whom nothing daunts in heaven above or earth beneath. He will scold me for extravagance."

Mrs Winter retired, not without a longing glance at the cosy fire, which the chill autumn day made acceptable. She knew that Richard Carroll's calls now were mainly connected with business, and were to Damaris alone.

Carroll looked tired and dispirited. His greeting was rather constrained as he noticed the hat and gloves laid ready for an expedition.

"Well, you haven't come with the postman to-day," the actress said, with mockery in her eyes. She was on the rug and did not rise from her crouching attitude on a heap of cushions. "You are doubtless glad that Sir Roland sends no more packages through your hands."

"And you?" he asked. There was surprise in his voice and a kind of scorn.

"I am more than glad," she said defiantly. She detected the scorn and it stung her pride. "What do I want with tokens of remembrance now, when I have him back at last? I can hear his voice every day; I do not care to read words that are merely written." The firelight showed her face lit up by exultation.

"You were pleased then to see Sir Roland Traherne and—his wife."

"And his wife. Yes," she answered. "You do not realise, Richard, what passion can do to a woman's spirit. It can change the very essence of her being. I might have hesitated once to receive the love of a man, who was not legally mine, but there are some people, whose mere material ties do not seem to count. He has never forgotten me. I have had all that was best from him. He did not write poems to this Lettice. Everyday language was as much as she would demand."

A shade settled on Carroll's face that aged him cruelly. This clever woman was so ignorant of vital knowledge, so dull to understand in spite of her swift brain.

"Material ties must count," he said slowly. "You know me too well to utter such words, thinking that I should be deceived. You have sympathy as full as I can render it. May it not be met by truth?"

"Sympathy! A poor substitute for life itself! You need not waste it on Damaris Newall." The tiny pulses in her wrists and neck were beating rapidly, and her breast rose in tumult beneath the folds of her dress.

"Give up Traherne," Carroll said. "He is unworthy of your love, even if he had not been false to it."

"False!" She turned on him with the fierce spring of a tigress. "You would have me believe that he was false during all those years. Could he write this if he were false and—this?" She went to a cabinet and brought out a small, inlaid box of Eastern design. "I would never show them to any other eyes, unless in refutation of such a foul charge as you bring against the writer," she said. "Ah, yes! I, too, was afraid that night. I thought my love had died. I was going to burn them all, but womanlike I paused to read the first and I knew that the man who wrote them was sincere in his great love. There are some men who seldom rise to great heights, and yet in those moments when they rise, they accomplish more than the quicker-souled. They are themselves as God meant them to be. Roland is not always as he was when he sent me this, but I know well that he might be through the influence of my spirit. You have seen his baser side, you think him selfish, carnal. I do not seem to recognise my lover in the aspect he presents to others."

"Think of Traherne as he was when he loved you. That was perhaps the real man. Bury your own love in its beautiful perfection before the least stain comes upon it. I plead with you for honour, the honour you have prized more than anything the world can give." Carroll's voice rang sharp. A struggle was tearing him with mortal agony. Should he force conviction upon her? Should he leave her to find the truth at the cost of her degradation? The crisis had come, but he dare not act.

Damaris had sunk down again by the fire, with the filmy sheets of paper in her hands. He knew that those words of mystical adoration had saved her from black depths of despair, but he wished that she had never read them. She caressed the leaflets and put them to her lips. "They are my excuse for folly, for sin if you will," she murmured; "if they had not come to me, I could not have borne the horrors of existence. You know my history. Think what I might have become had not these words lifted me from a struggling, hopeless outcast from happiness. It is not the vanity of being wooed. No one was ever so sadly free from vanity as I. It is the realisation of one ideal out of the many I found to fail. Do you remember how the first came? I was trying to kill memory; I was alone. There was the perfume of India about you as you came with the package in your coat. The first was not as beautiful as the others, but I have always loved it the best. See, it's nearly worn out."

She held it out with a faint smile at her own infatuation. Carroll winced and turned away. He could not tear up this belief by the roots, leaving barren the earth, where she had watched love grow.

He cursed Sir Roland as he had never cursed man before in the whole of his clean-souled run of years. The charm of fresh youth, and the pomp of rank had overcome what affection he had felt for genius and poverty years ago. He had inspired this worship to discard it lightly, without the pain of a farewell, and now he was anxious to fan it into flame again because he saw dis-

tinction in its purity. To be known as a famous woman's lover was an even greater temptation than the desire to marry wealth and beauty.

The recollection of the supper, to which Damaris had been led, writhing under the first fear of betrayal to be fêted like a courtesan, drove Carroll beyond control. He could not see her under this delusion longer, he would free her from Traherne. He put both arms about her, and tried to force the casket from her, but she beat him off and wrenched herself away, gasping words of outraged reproach.

"You shall not take them! You have tried, and she has tried—the little fool who persuaded him to marry her. They shall be placed in my coffin at the end." The wilderness of her passion was alarming. There was grave fear that she might do herself some injury, if Traherne again tired of her devotion and dropped the shameless farce of friendship. The éclat of her fame, the transient beauty of rekindled hope, the frequency of succeeding where many others had failed—on such slight claims rested her hold on a man, who knew no pangs of conscience in betrayal.

Carroll forced her into a seat with grim resolve in his mind. Damaris was too astonished by the change in his manner to resist when he took the letters from her.

"I am going to burn them," he said. "But first I have a confession to make. I wrote them, not Sir Roland. He never touched them. He does not know that you ever had them."

"Not his!" She sat still, frowning with the shock

of revelation. Once, she had wondered that Roland could have been transformed into a poet, but she had reassured herself with the saying that love can perform miracles. He had been strangely unresponsive, too, when she had spoken of letters since his return. He had begun a shamefaced apology, which she took for a blunder he thought necessary to make out of deference to his marriage.

"They are a forgery, then? Yet how can it be? They come from India. They are signed in Roland's usual writing. The paper is the kind he always kept for private correspondence. And the poems are original. I am not deceived in that."

"I wrote them. I sent them to India, and caused them to be mailed to you from there. I found out soon after your return Traherne was paying court to his present wife, before you were back in England. I wanted to keep the news from you for a little while. You were so happy, and your life had not known happiness. I thought you might forget; I meant to tell you, and then I grew afraid. It became a temptation. When you kissed the poems you kissed me. Forgive me, Damaris! There has been true love about you always. You were not deceived in that."

He came towards her with outstretched hands, but she did not extend hers. She was trying to understand the deception Carroll had practised for so long. She was fitting together the whole elaborate trick.

"You have been very clever," she said with an odd kind of choke in her voice. "You must have taken a

lot of trouble to work the scheme out. But you are a chess-expert. Your mind is quicker than a woman's. What was it Peacock said? I was reading it just now. Something about a woman's duty, you know. I shall have to conform to the mould at last. I have not been clever enough to see through a false lover."

He would rather that she had doubted and hurled scorn at him. It was characteristic of her to accept his statement without question. Her indifference crushed the faint hope that she might turn to him in her desolation. There would not be a scene. She would suffer without exhibiting her woes. His own love rose to dangerous heat as he devoured her slight figure. She was so frail in her stern fortitude. The ashen hue of her face betrayed the trial of endurance she was undergoing.

"How foolish you will have thought me!" she said. "I was quite transported once or twice. You must have enjoyed a Roman holiday each time you brought those letters."

Her bitterness roused him to a sense of his own pain. He had never given way to his fruitless passion, but had checked it with the quiet self-abnegation of a chivalrous man. Suddenly the pent longing of ten years destroyed his reserve. He knelt at Damaris' feet, kissing her hand and murmuring incoherent reproaches. He did not seek the mouth that had given him hard speeches and cruel smiles.

Damaris was afraid. Her impassivity gave way to gasping sobs.

"Don't talk about it! Don't talk about it! You hurt me! I can't bear it. I want to tell you something." She rose and uttered a cry of piercing agony. She did not understand Richard's action. She was absorbed in a fear that had descended on her while she listened to his confession. It had come upon her with a shock that rendered her lost to the grief of desertion. She held out her arms with a tense, tragic gesture of appeal.

"Richard, Richard!" Her voice had the terrified note of a child's. "It has come too, the other darkness. I cannot see you. I am blind."

CHAPTER XXIX

MRS WINTER looked from the window of a Silver Street house, with only a faint perception of the sights that passed before it, a living panorama of London life and movement. Her face was drawn and haggard with lines of suffering, that had aged her more than the lightly borne griefs of earlier years.

"I can't bear it! I can't bear it!" she moaned impatiently. She had always been accustomed to the free outpourings, that relieve a shallow nature from sorrow. She had sobbed till her strong frame was exhausted. Now, she could only rail sullenly against Fate.

She listened with momentary composure to sounds that penetrated at last from the next room, where Damaris Newall awaited either the great summons or a reprieve, which meant protracted torment certainly, with the doubtful prospect of a dreary, narrow future. The famous oculists of the day were performing a dangerous operation on her eyes. If they failed, death would come quickly; if they succeeded, Damaris might one day perceive dimly the cruder outlines of life's manifestations.

"If it had been anything else, it would not have mattered so very much," Mrs Winter reflected. "Nothing can make up to Damaris for this. She can't write, she can't act."

Useless regrets for the risks Damaris had taken lightly pursued one another through Mrs Winter's brain. It had been folly to finish the last book, worse than folly to subject the eyesight to the dangerous exposure of of the stage. She wished that Damaris had told her, that she might have used the influence, in which only herself believed. It had been cruel to her, who would have offered sympathy, at least. A realisation of the barrier that separated her from her mistress caused Mrs Winter to break forth into fresh sobs. She had been banished from the patient's side ruthlessly, because she had given way to natural grief, and now she could do nothing for the woman, who had suffered her worship with quiet nonchalance. She would have been happy in showing her queer, distorted affection, now that it seemed as if even Damaris must be grateful for the warmth of human love; but a strange nurse had taken her place, and she could only sit and wring her hands, conscious that her presence had not been that which Damaris sought.

There were plenty of cards and flowers and letters, strewn about the room, and the door-bell had hardly ceased to ring all day. Carriages had driven up with splendid callers, and the most tattered representatives of the East End had followed them with surreptitious enquiries at the area-door. Damaris' acquaintance would have furnished a wealth of interest to a student of humanity, had one been present to watch the stream that thronged the straw-paved street. Actors, writers, artists, musicians, philanthropists, philosophers, typical,

gamins of the London schools of roguery, gaily-dressed ladies with painted cheeks, protégés some, others grateful for her bounty, admirers of her wide genius. A great politician had called to express sympathy with a woman who had inspired a great career; many eager worshippers of notoriety crowded at his heels.

Damaris' smile would have had the cynic twist, if she had heard the sympathy expressed by such different voices. Her ambition might have preened itself with gratification had she not lain on a bed of mortal anguish, where nothing pressed on her consciousness but pain. Her small oval face was thinner already, and the bones showed sharp beneath the transparent skin. All her slender body writher, a mass of tortured nerves. She was brave but the tension had proved too much. The struggling pride of her existence dropped from her, like a discarded garment. She felt the pangs of the body that subdue the spirit. They had administered an anaesthetic that stifled her for a short time, then let her awake to martyrdom. She begged with abject cries for a respite, which could not be granted.

"Is it worth while?" one man asked the other in a low tone. "It won't mean a cure at the best."

"It is better than death. We are bound to fight that, whatever it costs. There would be the penalty of cerebral derangement it we didn't operate. I hope that now the brain will be fairly clear."

The words were cheerful, but the speaker doubted their truth. Was it better than death for Damaris Newall? The thought of what had been, and what

would be struck him with dread conviction that it was not. But this woman had been very reckless. She had sinned against Nature in forcing too quick fruition of her powers and she must pay the penalty. She must be satisfied with what she had wrested from fortune. It was more than nine-tenths of the world could gain. She would have a store of splendid achievements to feast her in the coming years of famine.

"She has good friends," the oculist said to Mrs Winter, as he told her result of his work. "There is every cause for thankfulness. You can interpret to her. You know all her tastes and whims from close companionship. It is a mercy that she is so fortunate." He was touched by Mrs Winter's tears.

Mrs Winter tried to acquiesce in his words, but her heart was heavy. She did not know the real Damaris. She could never give the significance to her vision that would convey a real impression to a mind of vivid, imaginative force. Richard Carroll was the only one, who did understand the wayward complex nature. Why did he fail to offer himself as a screen between Damaris and despair? Mrs Winter, who had been furious with his loyalty, was furious with his infidelity.

It was a slight balm to her spirit that she was the first to see Damaris, when the worst had passed.

"Good old Isa! Don't sniff. It's so unbecoming." The feeble voice seemed to travel over infinite distance. The great eyes were covered by defacing bandages, and all beauty had vanished with their brilliant shifting lights. Fierce rebellion raged in Mrs Winter's heart

at the sight of the pinched, worn face. Personal charm had been much to her. She had based her love on that rather than on abstract qualities. She had been fascinated by the moods reflected in Damaris' eyes, as she had been repelled by their mockery. Pity glided into the place of admiration. A softer expression moulded Mrs Winter's hard features, and there was something like triumph in its compassion. Damaris was hers now. Nothing could come between them. Carroll had been banished from the position he had held of confidant and friend.

"What is it?" she asked as a murmur reached her from the bed.

"It's so queer. I can't make my voice sound. I seem such a long way off. Take hold of me. Ah, now I know. I want Richard. Send for him. Let him come soon." She was very weak. The effort had exhausted her. Mrs Winter frowned, but she obeyed the behest. The note of command had been in the weakened voice.

Carroll was brought with all despatch. He came into the room with the old boyish eagerness that Mrs Winter hated. He went straight to Damaris' side, but he did not recoil as she had done, from the pitiful, upturned face.

"Speak to her," said the widow peremptorily. "She asked for you."

"Yes. I asked for you," Damaris' voice faltered. "Will you forgive me? I have wanted to ask you that before."

He put his arms around her, and she leaned against him like a tired child. "It is you who must forgive," he said roughly. "I treated you cruelly, though I did not know it."

"I wasn't worthy of such a sin as you laid on your conscience," she said with a trace of the old irony. "How could you stain perfection for me?"

His words were too low for Mrs Winter's hearing. They seemed to satisfy Damaris.

"I should like you to know that I have always cared till—till Roland came. I was but a humble gâte-papier, and I was lonely. You did not tell me. I thought you pitied me for Hardy's sake. Will you take what is left of Damaris Newall, poor fragments which everyone else would reject?"

They plighted their troth together, forgetful of the nurse and companion, who lingered by the window. It was an odd betrothal, but there was a solemnity in its pathos, that was more beautiful than the light vows of youth.

"You will have such scope for your unselfishness," Damaris said after the long silence that fell between them, "And Bunny Weir is quite happy among the valiant suffragettes, who are preparing to take Westminster by storm. She will write a nasty sentimental little story, lauding you as the noble hero with the invalid wife, and she will say once more that 'Damaris could not surprise her, she is so whimsical.' Is it flippant for the blind to joke? I ought to be good now, and chasten all my friends by an example of resignation. There was

Pew, who was a villain, and Dickens' fearful blind sinner in 'Barnaby Rudge,' but I can't think of any woman, who failed in virtue because she couldn't see. I saw you last, Richard. Thank Heaven, I saw you last."

CHAPTER XXX

THE sign-board of *Le Perroquet Vert* flapped idly in the breeze, its letters half-obliterated by the burning of many suns. "*A la descente des voyageurs.*" How few did descend now at the tumble-down inn, which had been flourishing in Breton eyes till the advent of the train to Pernotel! Gaston le Flam's wife read the words mechanically, for they were as familiar as her prayers in her well-thumbed missal, carried away from the convent school to form a connecting thread with past practices of devotion.

The dingy white house was a background that showed up Madame Le Flem's beauty in strong relief. She was of a finer type than the majority of Breton villagers, tall, well-built, of classical contours. Her dress was covered with flour from the round brick bakehouse, where she had been making bread, and her face was coloured rather too richly, after the heat and exertion of the day.

She ought to be at vespers in the church across the way, singing with the other women of Pernotel, and praying for her soul's grace, but she had made a promise to the English lady, who came so often to rest in the quiet inn-parlour, a promise that she would never leave the hostelry without a host to receive the visitor of Madame's daily expectation. Madame had waited throughout the weeks of late summer, and early autumn;

always patient, always cheerful, yet becoming paler and more shadowy every day. Was it Madame's husband, Madame's lover? The peasant could not form any clear conjecture, but she knew that it was one whom Madame loved. A vague wonder stirred in her mind about the world, from which she had received a messenger. She imagined it a brilliant place, where the streets were thronged with ladies as fine as Madame herself, and with men like the noble Marquis.

The bell was ringing insistently, and a priest passed through the churchyard. Madame Le Flem shrank back within the doorway, conscious of secret guilt. She was selling her soul for the Englishwoman's gold and fair speeches of trust. If her husband would only come, then she might leave her post and go humbly in the priest's footsteps to receive absolution for the vain thoughts she nourished even as she fingered her rosary. It seemed improbable that a stranger would arrive so late. Already the sun was setting, and she had been faithful during many evenings when the whole village knelt in prayer, and she was mourned as outcast. She might just slip across and listen from the church window for the sound of wheels, even while she purged her soul.

The bell ceased ringing, and the evening chants reached her ear. Those kneeling peasants were happy—they had not suffered the temptation of coins and flattery. She was angry with the stranger, who caused her to forsake the practices of her faith to keep watch. For whom did she watch? For a shadow, a mere phantasy

of Madame's brain, a fickle wooer who had lost his love? Resentment against the temptress stole into her mind. She was scorned by her "commères," as avaricious to the detriment of her salvation, because she remained at the inn door constantly to welcome each stray customer.

The noise of wheels broke upon her musings—a diligence was rumbling into sight along the dusty road, bordered by green banks of bracken. It was in the direction of the Englishwoman's many wanderings. She had bade Madame Le Flem keep a sharp eye on that long, white road by day and night. What she had daily conceived in her slow-working brain was going to take shape at last.

Few travellers alighted at Le Perroquet Vert, and those were generally the drivers of country carts to whom the jug of beer was irresistible, or a stray postman, anxious to exchange the news of the countryside. The inn was too far from the village to be the haunt of tourists—otherwise it would have had a rival in its humble way of business. As it was, after a glance at the humble exterior, cyclists and motorists hurried on to the nearest market town eight miles away.

But to-day, the diligence stopped, the driver reining in his horses suddenly in compliance with a command from the occupant of the close-curtained vehicle. The man was not a Breton, and he cast a scowl of contempt at Le Perroquet Vert, the fine stone church, the dozen cottages, and the distant cathedral towers, glittering in the sunlit distance.

Madame Le Flem hastened forward with a hasty

pat at the stiff, white *coiffe*, which did not cover her abundant fair hair. Her usual eagerness for custom was tinged in this instance with a spice of romanitc wonder. Out of the winding of the dull road had come a carriage, and out of that carriage——

The driver dismounted sullenly, and pulled back the heavy curtains of the diligence. He moved stiffly like one who has driven hard and kept his seat too long. A gentleman sprang out and scanned the village with the keenest scrutiny, to which it had been ever subjected. Madame Le Flem fell back a pace, struck by an access of rustic shyness. It was not so easy a task as she had imagined to deliver the message with which she had been charged. She must make sure that it was the long looked-for English stranger, who had come.

The driver came forward and asked for beer while his master stood beside the horse in deep agitation. But the rough delft jug attracted his notice, and he advanced towards the comely hostess.

"You have good beer?" he asked. "Have you also wine?" She brought out a glass and a bottle of *vin blanc*, which had been saved for rare festivities, being of choicer vintage than the common cider. A vague impulse that she must give the customer of her best urged her to produce it from the old oak chest, where it had been laid since her wedding-day.

The English stranger quaffed it gratefully, drinking to the health of his hostess in Breton fashion. A new element came into Madame Le Flem's life with the brief glimpse of this gallant gentleman. He was not so

finely dressed as M. le Marquis, and he had none of that insolent languor, thrilling to daughters of the soil, but there was that in his gracious ease, which betokened a truer gentlehood, than is attained by the noblest slip of foreign aristocracy.

"Perhaps you have good beds also?" he asked, returning the glass to her hands with a bow. "May I know if you have many guests?"

"None at all, M'sieu. But you will be welcome if you wish to stay the night. Our accommodation, however, may not be what you desire."

He made a hasty gesture of dissent.

"No, no. A thousand thanks, but I must pass on to-night. Can Madame tell me if there are English visitors in Pernotel?"

"The summer visitors have gone." Madame shook her head. She was not sure whether this was the gentleman, for whom she had lost her self-respect.

"There is one lady left, a dark, beautiful lady, with marvellous hair."

A quick exclamation arrested her.

"Go on, Madame, go on. A tall lady, who rides well and looks very strong." His description was derived from fragments of speech he had gleaned from people of small descriptive powers. He did not wish to leave the track on any baseless errand now that he had been searching so long without avail.

"Madame does not ride, but she is of fine figure, and can walk all day without fatigue. She goes every day down the road, which brought you here, and she waits

always for a compatriot. She is restless, she is anxious, she loses beauty."

"Does she then stay here?"

"She is with the good sisters at the Convent of the Cross. She says her friends do not know it, and she fears she may miss the one she awaits. Therefore, she bade me watch in the evening-time after the convent gates are shut, for none may pass them when the clock has struck seven."

"Did she tell you her name?"

"She gave me a letter. I will bring it for M'sieu. If it is not his——"

A momentary fear crossed the woman's mind. She was in dread of the generous stranger, whose pay she had received too greedily. Should she betray her trust, the sense of wrong-doing would be still more increased.

"I think that you may safely let me see it."

The quiet voice reassured her. The knowledge that the messenger had come hastened Mme. Le Flem to her hiding-place. The letter was there with the gold, which had accompanied it. She gave a guilty glance at the bribe, and returned to the door.

It was only an envelope after all, with a pencilled address and the one word "Lota." The name brought a train of sad reminiscences to Carroll's mind. Damaris had called upon it so often, as her mind voyaged in the awful seas that lie between life and death. "Can I see Madame to-night at the Convent?" he asked.

"The gates will be closed but if Monsieur hastens he

may gain admission. The Mother loves her English guest, and will be lenient."

Carroll bade a hasty farewell, slipped some money into the flour-white hand, and drove off at full speed. The pressing haste of his mind forbade slow travelling.

He obtained admittance after some delay, and waited for audience in the chill, bare room where the portress sat in the morning hours. He heard music and the sound of women's voices. This has been his wife's sanctuary, he remembered. She had fled here from the love of Sir Roland Traherne, and within these walls she had written the book, which had made her famous throughout the English speaking world. If she had only been satisfied with that fame!

A light footstep approached, and a woman stood before him with mute questioning in her dark, heavy-lidded eyes. It was clear that she was disappointed, for her eager advance had been checked on the threshold.

"I have a letter for you," he said, plunging at once into his business. "Perhaps I had better tell you first, that I am an envoy from Damaris, my wife."

Lota's hand shook as she stretched it out. She had thought to see George Graham when she opened the door of the tiny cell. She read the first lines with eyes, dimmed by sudden tears.

"I am writing to you in the hope that what injury I did you may be blotted out. Something has come into my life which had struck down all that went before, yet left a clearer vision of wrong and right. It was I who caused you to forsake your husband, and I pray

that I may be the means of bringing you back. He has always loved you, and longed for your love in return. Don't refuse it because pride refuses sometimes to acknowledge changes. He is proud too. I can't let you lose what I have found, yet I find the words so difficult. How can I urge you to fulfil what you promised, how can I point out the folly of solitary independence which fights against that which it desires? They will come some day—the ghostly tenants that fill a woman's empty heart. You are strong—but you will live the longer to be weak. They will not let me write more. Richard will bring this to you, and will tell you what has happened. Try to grant my prayer for forgiveness and bring peace to me yourself.—DAMARIS."

Tears fell as Lota read, but she failed to understand the actual significance of the words. The pathos of the appeal struck her with remorse. How cruel her conduct had been, how reckless her flight! She longed for the strength which might hold her wayward impulses in check, the love which might rivet her to duty. Damaris said she had that love. She would go to seek it with all humility, confessing her unworthiness. The pride that had been her undoing should be abased.

"You will come with me?" Richard Carroll asked at length.

He could not decipher the face before him, though it was curiously familiar. He had never seen it at Ballymore, he was certain. Perhaps it had looked at him from the crowd at some foreign theatre, perhaps in the streets of London. He had a singular

memory for faces, and this was one which held the grip of interest.

Lota turned towards him. "Is Damaris ill? I do not quite understand. She says you will explain."

He told her briefly the story of Damaris' sudden blindness, and of their subsequent marriage. "She could not rest till I had come in search of you," he said. "She holds herself to blame."

Lota listened with dazed comprehension. Damaris was blind! The intense horror of the affliction deadened her to her own suffering. And Damaris had written in the first shock of this calamity to rescue a friend, who had been one of myriads.

"Take me to her," she implored. "If it will bring relief, let it be as soon as possible. She never did me harm, but she seems to torture herself with accusations. When can we go?"

She looked at Carroll for the first time with recognition. She had never quite obliterated the expression of his kindly face from her remembrance. He was the man who had pitied her at Mont. St. Michel on the night when she had been compelled to accept George Graham's protection. It seemed quite natural that he had come to help her. He had helped her in dreams that night.

CHAPTER XXXI

THERE were few people stirring when Lota drove up the road to the Octagon House, beneath the whirling autumn leaves. She had been sick with disappointment to find that there was no one waiting at the station to welcome her. Richard Carroll had been obliged to go on his way to The Homestead. He thought it better that she should go alone. Carroll had been the kindest of cavaliers on the hurried journey from Pernotel, always on the alert for her ease and comfort, in conversational mood did she seem dull, silent if she seemed to crave rest. More than once Lota had marvelled at the tardy love he had awakened. To her the fine, high-bred nature held a charm that kept her aloof because of her own earth-worship, but Damaris Newall was an idealist, and groped in a dim spirit-world for a fellow-wanderer.

Perhaps it was the touch of austere self-restraint about Richard Carroll that separated him from thoughts of material affection. There was sometimes a light in his eyes before which many a woman might shrink in guilty fear. Their penetration could be cruel, their absolute truth might probe secret sins, and tear away self-respect.

Carrol told her the strange love-fancy, which had deceived Damaris for so long. He was ashamed of his deception and made light of the generosity of his devotion.

" It is marvellous that she was not angry at being

befooled," he said; "but Damaris is not like other women. Her life has been a bitter struggle against circumstances, yet she retains her faith in old beliefs, with which a righteous ancestry has endowed her. She has been loyal to Traherne in the midst of all temptation. You do not know what that means in an actress' career."

"She is the bravest woman I have ever met," Lota replied, fired by his enthusiasm. "She must have been warned of her approaching blindness, but she gave no sign."

"She was told six months ago," Carroll said with a sigh. "If she had only told me! She wanted to see Traherne before she lost sight and she wanted to complete her greatest book, to achieve her most brilliant success in the drama. She thought that the rest did not matter, trusting in his love to shield her from her affliction. He failed, and the end came sooner than she thought."

Lota felt that her own story lacked the mystery that formed a romantic background for the lovers, whom tragedy united. Her heart ached, in spite of her sympathy, as she listened to Carroll's adoration. Could she believe that her husband would forgive as Damaris had forgiven? In one case there was only a loving deceit after years of faithful service, while she might plead nothing for her desertion save the fear that she might prove a log round her husband's neck.

Carroll thought Mrs Graham a beautiful embodiment of physical fitness. She did not possess the magic gift which his soul craved. He believed that she would find

the happiness, which would transform her into a mother of fine children of the hardy stuff which forms the strength of Britain's armies. He discerned in her, too, a force of intellect that might refine the ruder mould of her husband's character. He had a warm pity for her trembling loneliness. He deemed the man stern to hardness, who left to her the task of supplication. In Richard Carroll's creed, the man knelt always at his mistress' feet, until the summons came to gird himself for service. It had a mediæval simplicity of conception, which suited the gallant bearing of Sir Roland better than the quiet scholar. Only Sir Roland was of the idol-cast, which receives flower-wreathed offerings, and blood-stained sacrifice with the same indifferent grace.

The wind howled drearily as Lota paused before her door. Her courage had waned since she said good-bye to Carroll. She would fain go forth again into the fast-gathering night.

"Her place is here with me—let her return to fill it, if she really cares." That was the utmost which Damaris' pleading had extracted. To outward appearances, Dr Graham had been little affected by his wife's absence.

Dare she face him after the open slight put upon his name by her cowardice? A thousand acts of charity rose to her mind, and he had once declared that he forgot all wrongs, if they had been acknowleged.

She pulled the bell. The jangling was so oddly familiar that she started back into the shadow of the porch again. Biddy might refuse to admit her. She

was travel-stained, dusty, and exhausted. She lifted the heavy veil she wore and tried to arrange her hair.

The house had an effect of desolation upon it. She could hear the hall-clock ticking faintly, but, elsewhere, there was silence. With nervous energy she tugged at the stiff bell-handle and listened with strained ears. A heavy tread passed across the hall. She shrank back, drawing her cloak around her. A voice called imperattively to Biddy, and at last the door was opened.

There was a pause, broken by an Irish storm of ejaculation. "Shure, 'tis the mistress herself!" Biddy's cry echoed through every corner of the house. The maidservant began to laugh and sob in hysterical excitement. She pulled Lota through the door, and seized her handbag.

"The master's in there," she whispered, pointing to the surgery. "Faith, he's missed you all these weeks. And your sister, the poor dear lady. You're ill, by the look of you, with nursing and fretting."

Lota hesitated on the threshold of her home. So little changed was the aspect of the house, and the faithful servant, so aged she herself, and altered even to a careless eye. Biddy's gaze had been one of quick comprehension. The hand laid on Lota's arm was caressing in its touch.

"Poor wee thing! And you've come a long way, and you're tired out. Go up to your room, and rest awhile before you see him. He won't know you've come."

Did he not listen then for her coming? The noisy greeting had failed to call him forth.

Lota yielded to her servant, and went up to the room, where everything was in spotless order. She noticed with a tremor of relief that her own prayer-book still lay on the dressing-table with the jewel-case, and silver trinkets she had left behind. It was a silent confirmation of the message she had received. She drew a breath of deep gratitude and knelt to pray.

Her head fell wearily on her arms, as she sent up a broken entreaty for guidance in this hour of darkness. As she prayed, peace fell on her and a sense of security. The racking torture of her exile failed to possess her faculties.

She washed and began to arrange her dress. She took a fresh gown from her wardrobe, a dainty lilac muslin, which George had always admired. For a moment she hesitated, then put it aside and resumed her shabby serge. She would not make too sure of her welcome; she came in all humility, an unbidden guest.

The dark waves of her hair, braided high above her brow, accentuated the pallor, which marred the beauty of her face. There was a hunted fear in the eyes, which had formerly looked out on the world in conscious fearlessness. Lines had been graven deep about mouth and eyes. Already she must begin to dread loss of youth. A passionate regret for her fading loveliness rose as she studied her features with a mood far removed from vanity. She returned in sorry guise, lacking the assured claim to homage, which had been born with her.

The hope that George would seek her presence died within her as she waited in the room alone. He must know that she had come. His inflexibility daunted her. She remembered the night when, proud in fairness and elegance, she had won a bitter victory.

She descended the stairs with slow steps, making no sound on the carpeted boards. She did not want anyone to hear her. She would steal on her husband unawares and surprise his real feeling. A faint scent of tobacco came to her in the hall, giving a curious physical shock. She must go into the room without giving herself time to reflect. Carefully rehearsed speeches faded before the reality of the scene.

George was seated beside the open drawer of his desk, turning over some letters and papers, a cigar between his lips. Details of dust and disorder stamped themselves on her mind, instead of the vital issues of the moment. He was reading something, she thought, from a paper in his hand. She bent forward till she almost touched his shoulder in her eagerness to discover the cause of his absorption. It was the sketch of Mont. St. Michel, and there were the other sketches too, scattered on the desk. The drawing of the Russian artist was placed by itself in a large pocket-book.

She touched him with a timid hand. He turned, uttering a sharp exclamation. "Lota! I was thinking of you. I was dreaming of you. Perhaps it is still a dream. I do not think you will come back. This is all I have left of the year with you."

But the touch of her hand was on his shoulder still,

the sound of her voice was in his ear. There did not seem to be need for explanation. She cast off the rôle of suppliant and seized the sketch from his grasp with imperative authority.

"You will not care for that now. It is the relic of a past we do not recognise, you and I—a past we mean to forget. Let us watch it burn together."

They stood with clasped hands for a moment beside the fireplace till the paper smouldered into ashes. Lota saw her own face lit up with a radiant beauty. There was hardness in its very perfection of health and animal content.

"I am glad that face is gone," she said with a shudder. "I am glad that I have you."

George watched it burn without emotion. It was the presentment of a woman he had neither known nor loved.

THE END.

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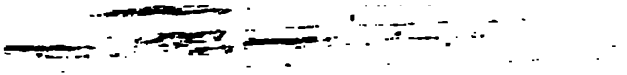

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